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Review

Understanding Young Adolescent Identity and Experiences Through Internal Dimensions: A Scoping Review

Dezeré J. Martin [1,*], Stacie K. Pettit [2], Sandra L. Stacki [3], Kristie W. Smith [4] and Micki M. Caskey [5]

[1] College of Education, Ohio University, Athens, OH 45701, USA
[2] Department of Teacher Education, College of Education, Georgia College & State University, Milledgeville, GA 30302, USA; stacie.pettit@gcsu.edu
[3] Teaching, Literacy and Leadership, School of Education, Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY 11549, USA; sandra.l.stacki@hofstra.edu
[4] Department of Secondary & Middle Grades Education, Bagwell College of Education, Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, GA 30144, USA; ksmit871@kennesaw.edu
[5] Department of Curriculum and Instruction, College of Education, Portland State University, Portland, OR 97292, USA; caskeym@pdx.edu
* Correspondence: martind3@ohio.edu

Abstract: The purpose of this study was to explore multiple facets of young adolescent identity and related experiences through a scoping literature review. Based on Gardenswartz and Rowe's Four Layers of Diversity Model, we specifically examined extant literature around five of the internal dimensions: gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and physical ability. Two overarching research questions guided this investigation: What is the range and nature of current findings on young adolescent identity and experience? What gaps exist in research on young adolescent identity and experiences? To address these research questions, our research group conducted a scoping literature review using predetermined search strings related to young adolescents, identity, and experiences. We organized and presented our results in three sections: (a) gender and sexuality, (b) race and ethnicity, and (c) physical ability and disability. For each section, we specified the relevant research details, summarized the nature and characteristics of articles reviewed in a table, and described the themes derived from the reviews of literature. An overall finding was the dearth of research on young adolescent identity and experiences. Our research highlights the importance of an intersectional approach for understanding and studying the totality of young adolescent identity and experiences.

Keywords: young adolescents; identity; experiences; gender; sexuality; race; ethnicity; physical ability; physical disability

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1. Introduction

Identity comprises many elements of human experience. While some define identity as "the distinguishing character or personality of an individual" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-a), we contend it encompasses much more than this straightforward, singular definition. We find that researchers have explored identity for decades from various angles and approaches, reflecting its multifaceted and subjective nature (Branje et al., 2021). Ultimately, the concept of identity is complex and continues to evolve with growing knowledge from human experiences. Identity includes a variety of contexts and perspectives; can be both fixed and malleable, personal and social; and holds unique attributes and experiences for every person.

Early adolescence is a pivotal juncture in a person's life, so much so that research indicates that this stage of development is the second most significant period of growth in the human lifespan (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). While one's identity continues to develop well into adulthood, for many, adolescence is a crucial time of identity exploration and development of a clear sense of self (Branje et al., 2021; Erikson, 1968). During early adolescence, youth begin to question and explore their personal identities, often in connection with their social identities. According to Branje et al., "Personal identity refers to one's sense of the person one genuinely is, including a subjective feeling of selfsameness and continuity over contexts and time" (Branje et al., 2021, p. 908). Given this importance, research on young adolescent identity and experiences is critical, not only to expand this body of knowledge, but also to inform policies, practices, and understandings in middle level education.

The purpose of this scoping literature review is to comprehensively examine the breadth and nature of current extant literature surrounding the following areas of young adolescent identity and related experiences: gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity, physical ability and disability. Drawing on Gardenswartz and Rowe's (2008) Four Layers of Diversity Model, we view identity as intersectional, multifaceted, and contextual. While we acknowledge that multiple identities and experiences make up all people, recent literature, as well as the present sociopolitical landscape, indicate that the dimensions of identity central to this review—gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity, and physical ability and disability—are highly salient to today's young adolescents. We conclude this review by discussing the importance of an intersectional perspective for understanding young adolescent identity and experiences for research and practice.

1.1. Four Layers of Diversity Model

Gardenswartz and Rowe (2008) originally designed the Four Layers of Diversity Model to support diversity in the workplace by enhancing employers' abilities to manage diversity and view it as a strength. The four layers of the model represent an integrative perspective of an individual and the many aspects that make up their whole as a person (see Figure 1). Gardenswartz and Rowe asserted, "All these aspects represent areas in which there may be similarity and common ground as well as differences. When well-managed, these differences have the potential to bring new perspectives, ideas, and viewpoints needed by the organization" (p. 36). They argued that while each person holds their own individual differences and similarities in experiences, personality, identity, and intersections, these assets can better an organization.

For this scoping review, we draw from the Four Layers of Diversity Model because it offers both depth and breadth in its orientation of diversity, reflecting a comprehensive understanding of individuals including their multiple identities and experiences. The model represents the multidimensional nature of diversity and includes components of identity that are both internal and external as well as fixed and fluid. We find that Gardenswartz and Rowe's (2008) model is relevant to the human experiences of diversity, and it articulates a relationship among various components that make up one's identity, particularly with respect to one's internal dimensions. Though the model is more than 15 years old, we argue that it continues to be valuable for exploring the internal dimensions of identity formation.

One critique and limitation of this framework is that the role of language and language formation is missing as a central dimension of identity. Language is also situated among the other dimensions of race, ethnicity, culture, gender, and sexuality. Young adolescents may be accepted in varying ways based on their command of English or multilingual abilities. We supplement the framework used with a sociolinguistic perspective informed

by scholarship which examines the notion of the self as being always under construction and shaped by culture (Hall & Du Gay, 1996) and which informs us of the role of language in identity formation (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004). Language is closely associated with culture and ethnicity, which are components of one's self-identity (Rychly & Pettit, 2016). Language always consists of social identities, social relations, and systems of knowledge and belief (Faircloth, 2010), and language is the most pervasive of the cultural productions of identity (Hall & Du Gay, 1996); therefore, language learning will inevitably influence identity development.



Figure 1. The Four Layers of Diversity Model (Gardenswartz & Rowe, 2008) * Refers to the integrative dimensions of an individual person.

1.2. Early Adolescence and Identity

Developmentally, early adolescence is a time of significant change in the lives, bodies, and minds of youth ages 10 to 15 years (Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Scales, 2010). Middle level educators often understand early adolescence through physical, cognitive, social–emotional, and psychological developmental characteristics which promote the need for developmentally responsive practices to support young adolescents (Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Scales, 2010). However, in recent decades, researchers are critiquing the overemphasis on developmentalism, as it leads to narrow views of young adolescents that lack consideration of issues related to equity and cultural responsiveness (Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Harrison et al., 2019), as well as issues related to students' identities. Although young adolescent development remains important to teaching and advocating for young adolescents, it is crucial to recognize "the role the intersectionality of social identities such as race, culture, and gender identity plays in identity development "(Brinegar & Caskey, 2022, para. 4). Developmental understandings of young adolescents and subsequent policies and practices must acknowledge the interplay and critical nature of students' multiple identities and experiences. This necessitates a holistic and equity-oriented approach to understanding all young adolescents, but especially those of diverse and historically marginalized identities (Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Harrison et al., 2019).

2. Materials and Methods

Given our interest in learning about young adolescents' identities and experiences, we decided to conduct a scoping literature review to examine research around multiple facets of young adolescent identity and experiences. As a methodology, researchers have

conducted scoping literature reviews to gain understanding of the breadth, nature, and range of extant literature regarding different concepts about a research topic (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Daudt et al., 2013; Paré et al., 2015). After determining that this type of review aligned our interest, we adopted Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) methodological framework for conducting our scoping study: (a) identify research question(s), (b) identify relevant studies, (c) select studies, (d) chart the studies, and (e) summarize and report the results. Next, we formulated two overarching research questions to guide our review: What is the range and nature of current findings on young adolescent identity and experience? What gaps exist in research on young adolescent identity and experiences?

To conduct the scoping literature review, our research group selected two education databases, Academic Search Premier and Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), as well as Google Scholar to search. Then, we developed search strings related to the population, identity, and experiences. Key terms for the population included young adolescents, early adolescence, and middle school. For identity, we selected key terms related from the internal dimensions of Gardenswartz and Rowe's (2008) Four Layers of Diversity Model: age, gender, sexual orientation, race, and physical ability. We also added other identity terms including race/ethnicity, racial/ethnic identity, sexuality/sexual identity, and physical disability, as well as the key terms for experiences were experience and experiences.

We conducted the search in spring and summer 2024, limiting our search to peer-reviewed articles published between 2015 and 2024. We excluded articles older than 10 years, articles not focused specifically on young adolescents (10–15 years old), and articles not related to the internal dimensions of gender, sexual identity, race, ethnicity, or physical ability. Using key terms and these parameters, we identified the relevant studies to review. We also used Zotero (i.e., open-source software) and Google Docs (online word processor) to store and share our collaborative, ongoing work.

3. Results

We present the results of our scoping literature review in three sections, reflecting five of Gardenswartz and Rowe's (2008) Internal Dimensions: (a) gender and sexuality, (b) race and ethnicity, and (c) physical ability and disability. For each of these sections, we disclose pertinent research questions, additional search terms, and the databases used to guide these reviews. Each section also includes important stages of scoping reviews: a summary table for charting the selected studies and a narrative explaining the results derived from the reviews. We note that some of the literature in this scoping review uses the gendered terms "Latina" and "Latino", as the original authors specified. While we acknowledge and support alternative language, such as "Latine" and "Latin-X", we contend that maintaining the gendered terms is important to the discussion of the literature's findings.

3.1. Gender and Sexuality

Our scoping literature review of young adolescent identity and experiences elucidated the important topic of gender and sexual identity, especially as it pertains to the social and educational experiences of young adolescents. We used the following research question to guide our review of the literature: What does existing literature tell us about young adolescent gender and sexual identities and their related experiences? Key search terms for this component of the literature review included gender identity, sexual identity, gender, sexuality, middle school, girls, boys, LGBTQ+, educational experiences, young adolescents, and early adolescence. Using the databases ERIC and Academic Search Ultimate, in addition to Google Scholar, we reviewed 45 articles from 2015 to 2024 as part of our preliminary search, using our search terms in various combinations. We found that much

of the existing literature on young people's gender and sexual identities and experiences focused broadly on adolescents, secondary students, or youth in general, including those from leading educational and/or health organizations (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024; Goldberg et al., 2024; Kosciw et al., 2022). Additionally, we found numerous studies that discussed academics or achievement by gender but did not directly relate to gender identity experiences nor sexuality, so we excluded these studies. Of the 45 articles that were part of our preliminary review, we found that 12 specifically aligned with our guiding research question. We described these articles in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of articles reviewed about gender and sexual identity.

Author(s) and Year	Journal	Study Design	Study Focus/Findings
Brown et al. (2024)	*Middle School Journal*	Qualitative study. Semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis.	LGBTQ+ middle schoolers are present in classrooms and can face discrimination that significantly impacts their school experiences. They desire supportive, protective, and informed educators.
Price et al. (2024)	*Journal of School Health*	Topic modeling method used with existing survey data.	Students perceive that their schools are LGBTQ+-affirming in various ways, including those that are both explicit and inexplicit. LGBTQ+-affirming schools are associated with lower odds of LGBTQ+ student suicide attempt.
Rauch and Madsen (2023)	*NASSP Bulletin*	Qualitative study. Case study design using semi-structured interviews. Constant comparative analysis method using themes from previous minority stress research.	Principals perceive that many LGBTQ+ students experience prejudice and stigma and that, depending on school context, some may choose to conceal their gender and/or sexual identities.
Follo (2021)	*The Qualitative Report*	Ethnographic and constructionist grounded theory. Self reflexivity and comparative participant observations over two years. Pattern coding was created from observation notes and audio recordings.	Six themes from a self-defense class: being the instructor, gendered discourse in action, body proximity and movement, the Invincibility Effect, the grade six and seven/eight divide and lived body moments. Girls internalize the frailty myth while boys feel invincible.
Masters et al. (2021)	*Journal of Early Adolescence*	Experimental study. Survey design. Multiphase data analyses, including independent samples *t*-tests, repeated ANOVA, and hierarchical multiple regression.	Peer acceptance is a strong determinant of behaviors among young adolescents. Young adolescents perceive that male peers violating gender appearance norms is socially costlier in comparison to female peers.
Sanchez et al. (2021)	*Sex Education*	Qualitative photovoice action research project. Participatory visual method with 17 youth collaborators over 12 weeks.	Identifies lack of adequate focus on integration of sexual well-being with physical, emotional, cognitive, and social aspects of health for Latina youth. Findings provide a discussion platform for Latina students' own perspectives.
Boyland et al. (2018)	*NASSP Bulletin*	Quantitative study. Survey design. Descriptive and inferential analyses with additional correlational and multiple regression analysis.	Research-based policies and practices may protect and support LGBTQ+ young adolescents from school discrimination and bullying.

Table 1. *Cont.*

Author(s) and Year	Journal	Study Design	Study Focus/Findings
Bragg et al. (2018)	*Sex Education*	School-based data. Interviews in a multi-phased process. Narrative reflections of language, social relations and relationships as imbued with gender meanings in context.	In England, young adolescents perceived more acceptance of gender and sexual diversity. Disdain for barriers to self-identity and self-expression. Supportive gender cultures, safe spaces, and networks needed.
Smith et al. (2018)	*Journal of Youth & Adolescence*	Surveys completed over 6th to 8th grade in 26 ethnically diverse schools. Participants' self-perceptions of gender typicality using Likert scales. Scores computed to regression slopes defined gender norm salience in each school and captured individual-level gender typicality.	Peer victimization and socio-emotional distress. Targeting less gender typical may increase distress of all youth, increasing gender conformity pressures. Greater loneliness and social anxiety in eighth grade boys. Girls may experience more mixed gender norm messages and feel less loneliness, social anxiety, and depressed moods.
Kornienko et al. (2016)	*Developmental Psychology*	Quantitative study with surveys and longitudinal social network modeling. Examined peer influences on four aspects of adolescents' gender identity in racially and ethnically diverse 7th- and 8th-grade students.	Assessed peer influence on changes in dimensions of gender identity. Gender role in friend network selection includes typicality and contentedness. Boys reported feeling more pressure for gender conformity from peers than girls.
Rogers et al. (2017)	*Psychology of Men and Masculinity*	Participants completed an adapted version of Adolescent Masculinity Ideology in Relationships Scale. Structural equation modeling (SEM) examined students' endorsement and adherence to norms predicted attitudes toward school and their engagement.	Examined whether both boys and girls endorsed or adhered to traditional masculinity norms of emotional stoicism and physical toughness and how varied by sex and ethnicity. Masculinity norms associated with increased school avoidance, decreased school liking and engagement.
Dinkins and Englert (2015)	*Sex Education*	Qualitative study. Case study design using observations, interviews, and document analysis. Multistage coding.	Themes included school environment and classroom contexts positioning students as heterosexual, student and teacher positioning of gender performance and sexual identity as *other*, and teacher and student differing text-based framings of one another.

From the 12 selected studies about young adolescent gender and sexuality, we identified four themes: (a) discrimination, bullying, and stigma, (b) educator knowledge, perceptions, and heteronormativity, (c) student perceptions of self and others, and (d) supportive policies, practices, and curricula. The following sections further articulate these four themes. We conclude by discussing the implications of this literature review for middle level education research, policies, and practices.

3.1.1. Discrimination, Bullying, and Stigma

We found the theme of discrimination, bullying, and stigma to be prevalent across most of the reviewed studies on young adolescent gender and sexual identity. From the perspectives of middle level educators, administrators, and even the students themselves, the literature made clear that middle level students, and particularly those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, and other non-cisgender and/or non-heterosexual identities (LGBTQ+), experienced higher incidences of discrimination, bullying, and stigma based on sexuality, gender expression, and gender identity. This aligned with findings from other sources, such as the GLSEN National School Climate

Survey, that demonstrate schools continue to be unsafe spaces for many LGBTQ+ young people (Kosciw et al., 2022).

Brown et al. (2024) explored the perspectives and experiences of LGBTQ+ middle school students as a pathway to offer advice to middle level educators charged with the responsibility of caring for and teaching all students. They found that student participants highlighted experiences of hostility and non-support at their schools, with some sharing stories of anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination and victimization at the hands of both peers and educators. Brown et al. (2024) asserted, "When educators disregard the need to and fail to develop explicit school policies and protections for students who are LGBTQIA+, they demonstrate a hidden level of staff-sanctioned victimization" (p. 17). This study, thus, suggested that the discrimination, bullying, and stigma experienced by LGBTQ+ middle school students is multidimensional and can be made better or worse by the actions and inactions of teachers.

Rauch and Madsen (2023) investigated middle school principals' perceptions of LGBTQ+ students in their schools. Their findings demonstrated that middle level administrators are aware that LGBTQ+ students can often face increased discrimination, bullying, and stigma by peers. However, they might hold varying perspectives regarding the prevalence, normalcy, and cause of this treatment of LGBTQ+ students at the middle school level, as well as how discriminatory experiences, such as name-calling, ultimately impact their LGBTQ+ students. This study suggested that middle level principals may not fully perceive or understand experiences of sexuality and gender-based discrimination, bullying, and stigma. Similarly, Boyland et al. (2018) engaged the perspectives of principals, finding that most principals in the study reported bullying or discrimination of LGBTQ+ students occurring within their schools. They noted these findings reinforce the need for increased efforts to reduce bullying and discrimination of LGBTQ+ students in schools.

These studies emphasized that middle level education must become aware of the multidimensional, hurtful influences that impact middle school students who are LGBTQ+, non-binary, and/or gender non-conforming. Research indicated that schools should increase efforts and action to provide space for knowledgeable advisors and mentors, such as in a Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) or, as Gennosa (2024) called them, Gender and Sexuality Alliances. This extracurricular structure could also provide students support for each other.

3.1.2. Educator Knowledge, Perceptions, and Heteronormativity

Another theme we identified from the extant literature was the notion of educator knowledge, perceptions, and heteronormativity. Research showed that middle level educators hold their own perceptions and understandings of gender and sexuality, and these may or may not necessarily accurately reflect students' experiences of their gender and sexual identities. In their qualitative study with a self-defense teacher as participant observer, Follo (2021) provided an example of a physical education class providing data on how girls and boys use and perform their bodies. From the educator's observations, one theme emphasized gendered discourse in action and demonstrated how the frailty myth for girls was internalized in their words and movements. They perceived that more boys expressed a sense of invincibility in danger scenarios. Even though they were increasing their self-defense learning, the teacher–researcher perceived that heteronormativity was evident in their differing gendered responses.

The research also revealed that educators may lack adequate knowledge and experience with LGBTQ+ students and gender and sexual identities. Rauch and Madsen (2023) found that the principals they interviewed often viewed their LGBTQ+ students as outgoing and confident. Consequently, this perception influenced the ways the school administrators understood LGBTQ+ students' experiences and peer relationships. From their view, the

principals believed there to be a correlation between LGBTQ+ students' visible confidence and their overall flourishing as a student and person. Additionally, they perceived a greater level of acceptance of LGBTQ+ students. However, Rauch and Madsen (2023) affirmed that recent research of LGBTQ+ youth experiences does not support these perceptions. Dinkins and Englert (2015) observed similar patterns in their findings, noting that the educator at the center of their case study assumed that their students accepted those of different identities. However, researchers noted that students' discriminatory behavior and language demonstrated that this was an inaccurate assumption on the part of the teacher. These assumptions could lead to educator inaction, avoidance, and deepened conceptions of heteronormativity (Brown et al., 2024; Dinkins & Englert, 2015; Rauch & Madsen, 2023).

Educators' perceptions were evident in the perpetuation of heteronormativity in the school environment. Dinkins and Englert (2015) found that the educator in their case study, while teaching LGBTQ+ literature in their middle school classroom, nonetheless perpetuated a heteronormative school environment and, at times, positioned both students and LGBTQ+ book characters as other, separate from binary conceptions of normal. In doing so, opportunities for students to make deeper connections with the text were stifled. They wrote, "It is important to note that while the teacher wanted students to forge a personal connection with the text, positioning students as heterosexual or other limited their interpretations and foreclosed possibilities for student understanding" (Dinkins & Englert, 2015, p. 401). This indicates that educators may assume that they are being inclusive of gender and sexual identities in their teaching practices but may lack pedagogical skills and fundamental understandings of gender and sexual identity.

Research also suggested that LGBTQ+ young adolescents recognize when their educators hold flawed perceptions or lack knowledge about issues related to gender and sexuality (Brown et al., 2024). Brown et al. (2024) noted student participants' frustrations with what they considered educators' minimal or even performative methods of support and avoidance of LGBTQ+-related curricula and discussions. Dinkins and Englert (2015) also identified that despite the heteronormative environment, some students still highlighted the experiences and struggles of the LGBTQ+ book character related to their sexual orientation, an interpretation of the text that differed vastly from the teacher's.

Identifying students' discomfort with issues related to their gender and sexual identities is not easy. Teachers must understand that their own observations do not tell the whole story, and they may unknowingly support a binary, heteronormative classroom and school environment. A critical pedagogy approach is needed to allow the students to discuss difficult issues in a safe classroom environment.

3.1.3. Student Perceptions of Self and Others

We heard student voices in several articles indicating a perceived growing understanding of gender identity and expression and demonstrating how their reasoning and judgments affect other students' comfort and expression of their gender identity. These ideas overlapped with aspects of stigma and heteronormativity yet provide broader understanding of students' need for empathy and support. In England, Bragg et al. (2018) found that students believed their society to be more accepting of gender and sexual diversity, even though they admitted that harassment exists, and school structure reinforces binary expression. They desired more supportive, safe spaces and the creation of more networks and forums for learning about gender injustices. Students thought everyone should be able to live their own lives, some even overriding their prescriptive religious learning. They felt that differences should not create barriers.

Peers have become instrumental in middle school students' reflections and expressions of their gender identities. Smith et al. (2018) found through an over two-year study in

diverse, urban schools that peers targeted the less gender typical. They might increase victimization and socio-emotional distress and increase gender conformity pressures. The Smith et al. (2018), Masters et al. (2021), and Kornienko et al. (2016) studies touched on peer influence and emphasized findings that boys felt more pressure and faced higher social consequences for violating expression-based gender norms when compared to female peers. Boys had less flexibility and assimilated more with their peers on what was acceptable appearance. Girls experienced more mixed gender messaging and thus have broader acceptance, which creates less social anxiety (Bragg et al., 2018). Kornienko et al. Kornienko et al. (2016) also described the role of gender and gender identity for network selection, finding that young adolescents use typicality, contentedness, and gender when selecting their friends.

Another study from Rogers et al. (2017). Rogers et al. (2017) explored masculinity and school adjustment by examining whether and how both boys and girls endorsed or adhered to emotional stoicism and physical toughness, identified as traditional masculinity norms. Latino and white students showed few differences in levels of masculinity. (Note: We chose not to capitalize white as a rhetorical move for decentering whiteness in this article.) However, importantly for schools to acknowledge, masculinity norms, especially emotional stoicism, were likely to increase school avoidance and decrease both school liking and school engagement.

A final study with student voices included photovoice action research methods. Sanchez et al. (2021) provided young adolescent Latina youth an opportunity to collaborate in creating a platform to discuss how young people's ideas and needs align with or diverge from current health discourses. They wanted to identify inadequate integration of sexual well-being into all the developmental aspects of health for Latina youth who too often were viewed as victims and vulnerable to risky sexual behaviors.

Student perspectives are essential to holistically understanding gender identity, expression, and sexuality for middle schoolers. These studies may help educators and parents in their lives to become aware, understand, and empathize with students in route to helping bring changes to policy and practice as needed.

3.1.4. Supportive Policies, Practices, and Curricula

A final theme within the literature concerned supportive educational policies, practices, and curricula related to gender and sexual identity. Students and others considered schools that included various supportive measures to be affirming of gender and sexual diversity; research demonstrated that this could have a significant positive impact on students' well-being (Brown et al., 2024; Kosciw et al., 2022; Nath et al., 2024). Price et al. (2024) found that middle and high school students determined their schools to be LGBTQ+-affirming through the inclusion of supportive measures such as LGBTQ+ student organizations, teachers requesting to know students' pronouns, visual representations such as pride flags and affirming posters, and supportive staff and peers. They found that students who perceived their school to be LGBTQ+-affirming were at a 20% lower likelihood of attempting suicide. This demonstrated the power and possibilities of supportive policies, practices, and curricula for LGBTQ+ youth.

In their study of 101 middle school principals in Indiana, Boyland et al. (2018) found that most participants indicated that their schools included policies and practices that directly support their LGBTQ+ students. These support measures included schooling practices such as policies and school activities that were not discriminatory of LGBTQ+ students, bullying-reporting systems, regular communication of anti-bullying expectations, supportive school personnel who intervene in support of LGBTQ+ students when they hear or see discriminatory behavior, and student training on LGBTQ+ bullying and dis-

crimination prevention. While these were important supportive measures, the participants' responses did indicate that many Indiana middle schools lack other supportive components like GSAs or other similar student organizations, LGBTQ+-inclusive curricula, and school personnel training on LGBTQ+ bullying and discrimination prevention. These findings aligned with the experiences of the students in Brown et al.'s (2024) study, who reported experiencing few lessons about LGBTQ+ gender identity and sexual orientation in their schools, even though they personally viewed it as a need. Some even suggested that their educators are uncomfortable with the topic, which thus deterred them from teaching about it (Brown et al., 2024). While middle schools might show positive progress by adopting some supportive policies and practices for LGBTQ+ students, it was clear that gaps remain that serve as a barrier to holistic support of students' gender and sexual identities. Further, Boyland et al. (2018) determined that principals of middle schools that implemented best practices for supporting LGBTQ+ students reported lower levels of bullying and discrimination against LGBTQ+ students. As with the findings of Price et al. (2024), these studies suggested a strong relationship between affirmative educational policies and practices and LGBTQ+ student well-being.

Research on supportive policies, practices, and curricula make evident that these are necessary components for creating affirming school spaces for all students, and especially those who are LGBTQ+. While middle level educators as well as LGBTQ+ students seem to recognize these measures are important for students' learning and well-being, work still needs to be done to adopt broader intentional, structural, and visible means of support in schools.

3.1.5. Conclusions: Gender and Sexuality Identity

The scoping literature reviewed on young adolescent gender identity and sexuality revealed a gap in research on sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and related identity experiences in middle school young adolescents specifically. While our review made clear that some research has begun taking notice of this unique intersection of gender and sexual identity, experience, and development, we look for future research to continue to grow this body of literature, with particular emphasis on the experiences and perspectives of young adolescents and practices that support them in their gender and sexual identity development.

Given the dearth of literature found that represented these intersections of identity, we did not find disagreement in the literature. Rather, we found that although research spanned contexts, topics, methodologies, and perspectives, there was agreement throughout the literature reviewed. The literature made clear that LGBTQ+ middle level students experience significant discrimination, bullying, and stigma in many facets of their lives, including their schools, and that students, educators, and administrators note this. The literature suggested that while school personnel may have awareness of LGBTQ+ students' experiences with discrimination, bullying, and stigma, they may lack knowledge and experiences that impact their perceptions of LGBTQ+ student experiences, needs for support, as well as their own expressions of heteronormativity in their teaching practices. Student perceptions were also an important theme presented in the literature. Young adolescents often developed a deeper understanding of themselves and navigated complex social structures (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). When it comes to gender and sexuality, the literature revealed an increased sense of awareness and student voice concerning these topics. However, it also revealed that social dynamics played a key role in young adolescents' gender expression and normative behaviors. Students' gender typicality, comfort, or emotional distress were often a result of their peer influences. Finally, the literature showed an increased need for supportive educational policies, practices, and curricula, as these can have many positive

impacts for all students but especially those who are LGBTQ+. Holistic and supportive policies and practices are essential for improving not only young adolescents' well-being but also their experiences of school.

3.2. Race and Racial/Ethnic Identity

In our scoping review of literature around young adolescent identity and experiences, we identified another topic: race and racial/ethnic identity as it pertains to young adolescents' larger identity formation and schooling experiences. This part of our review was driven by the following research question: What does extant literature reveal about young adolescents' identities and experiences and race/racial/ethnic identity? Key words guiding this part of our search were the following: young adolescents, early adolescents, middle school, race, racial identity, ethnic identity, experience(s), academic outcomes, African American, Black girls, bullying, diversity, racial discrimination, racial disproportionalities, racial socialization, school climate, schools, sexual harassment, youth development. Using these key terms and in various combinations, we searched for relevant literature within ERIC and Academic Premier databases, limiting our search to a date range of 2015–2024. This search yielded 26 peer-reviewed articles, which we collected and organized, using a spreadsheet. After previewing the twenty-six articles, we excluded eight articles that did not closely align with our research question, narrowing our number of peer-reviewed articles to sixteen articles that informed our research question. We read these articles and summarized their characteristics in Table 2.

Table 2. Characteristics of articles about young adolescent identity and experiences and race, racial/ethnic identity.

Author(s) and Year	Journal	Study Design	Study Focus/Findings
Nyachae and Ohito (2023)	*Urban Education*	Qualitative	Examined Black girl identity experiences around extracurricular programs designed as interventions for Black girls. Found that the discourses put forth by these kinds of programs do not authentically affirm Black girl identities, but rather perpetuate the ideas and identity expectations put forth by the majority culture
Anthony-Stevens et al. (2022)	*Journal of Research in Rural Education*	Qualitative, Co-ethnographic	Examined the work of a white-teacher-led interdisciplinary unit on U.S. enslavement through B narratives. Attention to critical whiteness studies and discourse studies. Found the need for building racial literacies in predominantly white spaces and the importance of place-based racial literacies with localized histories in view.
Beschorner et al. (2021)	*Middle Grades Review*	Qualitative, Single Case Study	Explored a middle school principal's efforts to facilitate racial dialogues among students. Found a need for inter- and intra-racial dialogue spaces, intentional and strategic planning, and a need for developed relationships.
Kogachi and Graham (2021)	*Developmental Psychology*	Quantitative	Examined same-race friendship preferences among middle schoolers. Findings suggested that same-raced friendships increased over the course of middle school, shaped by school and external social factors. Findings also suggested that there were same-race friendship connections to student representation in classes (e.g., which student groups were underrepresented and in classes together).

Table 2. *Cont.*

Author(s) and Year	Journal	Study Design	Study Focus/Findings
Nishina and Witkow (2021)	*Journal of Early Adolescence*	Quantitative	Explored multiracial youths' racial/ethnic homophily in their best friend relationships. Found multiracial youth were less likely to perceive a racial/ethnic or objective match in their best friendships. Provided suggestions for future lines of inquiry.
Davis and Hall (2020)	*Middle School Journal*	Qualitative	Explored middle level teachers' work at the school level to engage students in imagination and activism about the American Dream. Found that students can be activists against racial injustice and that intra-racial dialogue is possible. Provided implications for racial identity work at the middle level.
Mims and Williams (2020)	*Journal of Adolescent Research*	Longitudinal Mixed Methods	Explored Black girls' beliefs about race during early adolescence. Found Black girls in the process of making meaning of racialized stereotypes and messaging across aspects of their developing identities.
Rivas-Drake et al. (2020)	*Youth & Society*	Quantitative	Examined middle school students' exposures to school based social-emotional learning strategies and racial/ethnic identity. Found that socio-emotional practices were associated with youths' racial/ethnic identity exploration.
Tamerat (2020)	*Middle Grades Review*	Qualitative	Interviewed teachers to understand their perspective about students' funds of knowledge. Findings suggested that middle school teachers did not engage these concepts in practices and their perspectives were racially biased.
Gibson et al. (2019)	*Children and Youth Services Review*	Sequential mixed methods design	Examined the out-of-school suspensions and experiences of Black girls. Found an overrepresentation of Black girls in out of school suspension discipline and an overall hyper-disciplining of Black girls compared with other racial/ethnic groups. Suggested strategies for reducing disciplinary inequities for Black girls.
Stein et al. (2019)	*Developmental Psychology*	Mixed Methods	Examined racial-ethnic peer discrimination experiences of Latinx youth. Found that Latinx youth had a higher likelihood of experiencing discrimination from both ingroup and outgroup peers.
Lewis et al. (2017)	*Journal of Youth and Adolescence*	Non-Experimental, Cross-Sectional, Correlational Design	Examined ethnically diverse sixth graders' cross-ethnic peer relationships and academic outcomes. Found cross-ethnic interactions to be associated with higher academic achievement.
Hughes et al. (2016)	*Child Development*	Longitudinal Mixed Methods	Examined perceptions of racialized discrimination in 8th and 11th graders. Found a decrease in discrimination in middle school. Discrimination varied across racial/ethnic identity, but not across gender.
Rodríguez-Castro et al. (2016)	*Middle School Journal*	Qualitative	Explored how middle level teachers and institutions can demonstrate a sense of caring and communication across linguistic differences. Provided suggestions for educators' practices around cultivating inclusive belonging in middle schools.

Table 2. *Cont.*

Author(s) and Year	Journal	Study Design	Study Focus/Findings
Hayes et al. (2015)	*Journal of Early Adolescence*	Mixed Methods	Explored how parent and middle school peers' beliefs and behaviors influenced Latino adolescents' achievement perspectives, school engagement, and academic achievement. Found both parents' perspectives and peer influences to affect students' achievement. Provided implications for subsequent research.
Voight et al. (2015)	*Social Sciences*	Quantitative	Examined school-based discrimination and academic outcomes for African American students in a middle school. Found a relationship between racial discrimination and academic outcomes.

3.2.1. The Persistence of Racial/Ethnic Injustice

Across the literature, the idea that racialized injustice persisted in the globalized and U.S. social contexts, and in school settings, in particular, as social institutions (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), was clear. With a focus on middle grades education and racial/ethnic injustice in the literature, we explored racial biases, racialized disciplinary inequity, the social marginalization of Black girl identity, racialized underrepresentation in higher level academic coursework, and racialized disparities in young adolescents' experiences of school climate and a sense of belonging.

Gibson et al. (2019) explored out-of-school suspensions of Black girls in middle school, illuminating the hyper-disciplining of Black girls in both the forms of frequency and the harshness of disciplinary measures. They suggested strategies to reduce trends in hyper-discipline for Black girls, noting that middle grades educators and leaders should strive to disrupt persistent racialized inequities that Black girls encounter in the school setting. Also, examining Black girlhood and identity, and illuminating the criminalization of Black girls, both historically and contemporarily, Nyachae and Ohito (2023) explored urban extracurricular programs' harm to Black girl identity formation, finding that the discourses of these programs "advance respectability politics, thus reinforcing an exclusive model of ideal Black girlhood" (p. 743).

Taking up youth identity formation with racialized implications, Mims and Williams (2020) explored Black girls' ideas about race and identity, finding Black girls to be making meaning of their racial/ethnic identities "within their multiple worlds (i.e., schools, classrooms, families, and peers") (p. 2). Their study implied a need to examine influences that Black girls get for their racialized identity formation, to include those experienced in the schooling context as a "socializing environment" (p. 1). Also, examining youth influences in the school context, Hayes et al. (2015) explored parent and peer perceptions around Latino adolescents' ideas about academic achievement and school engagement. They found that parent beliefs were significant in adolescents' perceptions of achievement, as well as peer influences, and they suggested that this study can inform practices for school engagement of the community, and thus impact student achievement and academic experiences.

With a focus on adolescents' racialized experiences of schooling, Voight et al. (2015) examined middle school students' perceptions of school climate in California, finding both racial climate experience gaps and related academic opportunity gaps for racially/ethnically marginalized students. Similarly, Hughes et al. (2016) explored adolescents' perceived discrimination in schooling with racialized implications. They found an increase in discrimination in middle schools, with attention to race and ethnicity. Stein et al. (2019) also examined discrimination in adolescent youth, focusing on the racial/ethnic peer discrimi-

nation of Latinx youth, finding a high number of experiences of discrimination from both ingroup and outgroup adolescent peers.

The literature in this category pointed to not only the persistence of racialized injustices as endemic to the U.S. schooling context (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), but also the idea that youth in the middle years are particularly affected by the experience of racialized injustice as they negotiate societal influences and express developing identity (Bishop & Harrison, 2021).

3.2.2. The Negotiation of Racial/Ethnic Identity as Part of the Middle School Experience

Another important theme in this part of the literature was the significance of youth negotiation of race and racial/ethnic identity as part of the middle school experience. This theme showed up in relation to young adolescent peer relationships, both generally and in friendship, and in correlation to academic achievement/opportunity. Taking up racial identity and adolescent experiences, Lewis et al. (2017) explored middle school peer relationships across racial/ethnic groups related to academic achievement. This study suggested that daily opportunities for students to interact across their racial/ethnic groups is an important practice for young adolescent social development. However, this study did not find a connection between racial/ethnic group interactions and lowering or disrupting the academic opportunity gap for students from historically racially/ethnically marginalized groups.

Focusing on friendships as peer relationships, Nishina and Witkow (2021) explored young adolescent multiracial youth negotiation of homophily in best friendship, concluding that "multiracial youth perceived a racial/ethnic match with their best friend when they and their best friend both reported the exact same monoracial backgrounds" (p. 1289). This study underscored the experience of young adolescents negotiating their identities with a focus on their racial/ethnic selves in relation to those of their peers. Similarly, Kogachi and Graham (2021) examined same-race friendship preferences among middle school students. They noted an increase in same-race friendships over time across racial/ethnic groups. They also found that "African American and Asian youth who were underrepresented in honors classes showed steeper increases in same-race friendship preference over time" (Kogachi & Graham, 2021, p. 2134). Their study provided implications around a need for bias-free school environments that cultivate both equitable academic opportunities and a sense of identity affirmation/belonging for those students historically marginalized along racial/ethnic lines.

The studies in this section that took up the theme of negotiating racial identity as part of the middle school experience illuminated a deep significance in adolescents' development of racialized self-perceptions as part of the developmental stages of the middle years (Brinegar & Caskey, 2022).

3.2.3. Middle School Curricula and Instruction, School Culture, and Organization

A third theme in this part of the literature concerned the implications for middle school around curricula and instruction, school culture, and organization. These implications were relevant across school settings of varying racial/ethnic diversity and took up a focus on teachers, school leadership, students, and community.

Taking up teachers' pedagogical practices, Anthony-Stevens et al. (2022) examined the teaching of an instructional unit on enslavement and freedom fighting in a predominantly white region of the United States, taking up whiteness studies and considering how students engaged in the unit. Findings illuminated tensions in the required racial literacy work within predominantly white school spaces, such as wrestling with the falsehood of colorblindness, conversations that revealed a hyper-focus on language about race

(vs. focusing the enactment of racism), and Black students' experiences of direct and indirect harm during the teaching of the unit. The researchers also emphasized a need for place-based awareness and an examination of localized racial histories as part of the teaching and learning within units that take up complex racial histories. Also exploring approaches to practice, Beschorner et al. (2021) described a middle school principal's efforts to facilitate conversations about race, concluding that there is a "demonstrated need and demand for spaces that support inter-and intra-racial dialogues" (p. 1), a need for intentionality in planning for productive conversations about race, and the necessity of interpersonal connections as a foundation for effective conversations about racial issues in the school context.

Davis and Hall (2020) examined middle school teachers' pedagogical approaches to racial activism in spoken word performance pedagogy. They found that through this approach, students engaged in activism across racial differences and that this pedagogical approach contributed to an inclusive classroom culture. In a different study, Tamerat (2020) interviewed Boston-area middle school teachers about their understandings and use of global competence pedagogies, finding that the teachers studied did not generally apply these concepts in practice, though teaching in racially/ethnically diverse settings. Researchers also concluded that embedded racial biases undergirded the teachers' work. Also researching middle school practices, Rivas-Drake et al. (2020) examined school-based socio-emotional learning approaches with attention to racial/ethnic identity. Their findings suggested that in middle school, socio-emotional learning practices can "afford youth opportunities for autonomy, prosocial behavioral routines, and collaboration in the context of homeroom (advisories), and (these) classrooms were consistently associated with greater ethnic-racial identity exploration and resolution" (p. 1331).

Rodríguez-Castro et al. (2016) focused on practices between school and community, exploring middle level teachers' and institutions' approaches for demonstrating a sense of caring and communication across linguistic differences. With a focus on Latinx families in the study's school community, they advocated for culturally and linguistically sustaining practices to cultivate inclusive and reciprocal family and community engagement, toward positive student experiences in the middle school.

The literature in this section suggested that while racial/ethnic injustices and challenges persist and are embedded in the educational systems that undergird middle school in the United States, middle level educators have pedagogical and school organization knowledge to inform the disruption of these injustices and to move toward more humanizing school cultures, fostering greater belonging and inclusion, particularly for racially marginalized youth.

3.2.4. Conclusions: Race and Racial/Ethnic Identity

The literature explored around race and racial/ethnic identity as it pertains to young adolescents' larger identity formation and schooling experiences varied by research contexts, purposes, methods, and findings. A key theme that cut across this literature was the persistence of racial injustices in the socio-educational context affecting middle grades in the United States. This persistence of injustice connected to the other themes in this section, such as the negotiation of race and racial/ethnic identity as part of the middle school experience and implications for subsequent policy, structures, and pedagogies for the middle grades. The literature revealed that given the persistence of racial/ethnic injustice in schooling as a social institution (Price et al., 2024), there are yet many directions for the development of future research, to include opportunities for research in democratic dialogue with communities that experience ongoing racial/ethnic marginalization and discrimination. Further, as it pertains to racially marginalized youths' experiences and

identity formation, we determined the need for more research to amplify these youth voices and to disrupt harmful narratives perpetuated by numerous social inputs, including the influences racially/ethnically marginalized youth experience as part of schooling (Gibson et al., 2019; Mims & Williams, 2020). The literature was clear that in adolescence, youth are negotiating racial/ethnic identity, and that schooling is a place for socialization, and thus influential during this developmental stage (Mims & Williams, 2020). To disrupt negative schooling experiences and harm during young adolescents' stages of identity negotiation, particularly for racially/ethnically marginalized youth, we recognized the need for a continued focus on systemic educational inequity and the advancement of racial/ethnic justice in the educational context.

3.3. Physical Ability and Disability

Another topic explored in the extant literature about young adolescents' identity and experiences was physical ability and disability. To guide our scoping literature review of this topic, we formulated a broad research question: What insights does the extent literature reveal about young adolescents' physical ability or disability as related to their identity and experiences? We identified key terms: young adolescents, early adolescence, middle school, physical, physical ability, disability, physical disability, identity, experience, and experiences. Using these key terms in search strings, we conducted our search of ERIC and Academic Premier databases to locate the relevant research literature. We conducted the search in spring 2024 setting the inclusion criteria of peer-reviewed articles that were published between 2015 and 2024. This initial search resulted in 63 articles, which we organized in a spreadsheet. We removed duplicate titles and excluded articles not focused specifically on young adolescents (10–15 years old) as well as articles outside the scope of our topic. As a result of this exclusion process, 13 articles remained. After reading these 13 articles, we narrowed our review to the 10 articles aligned with our research question. We summarized the characteristics of each of these articles (see Table 3).

Table 3. Characteristics of articles reviewed about physical ability and disability.

Author(s) and Year	Journal	Study Design	Study Focus/Findings
Bärwalde et al. (2023)	*Qualitative Health Research*	Qualitative study. Semi-structured interviews. Open, axial, and selective coding.	Adolescents' (with and without physical disabilities) perceptions of social participation. Interaction and social environment influence adolescents' views of social participation.
Jacobs et al. (2023)	*Middle School Journal*	Program evaluation. UCS Liaison Survey, Student Experience Survey, and Liaison reflections.	Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools (UCS) provide developmentally appropriate and socially equitable experiences for young adolescents (with and without intellectual disabilities [ID]). UCS enhances meaningful social inclusion of students with ID.
Forber-Pratt et al. (2021)	*Rehabilitation Psychology*	Qualitative study. Semi-structured interviews. Hamilton's rapid assessment process. MAXQDA. In vivo coding.	2 broad themes of internalization and externalization of disability identity. Adolescents' disability identity was not static and had different consequences depending on context.

Table 3. *Cont.*

Author(s) and Year	Journal	Study Design	Study Focus/Findings
Chen et al. (2020)	*Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*	Multi-method survey design. Chi-square analysis	Teachers rated students with disabilities with more multi-risk interpersonal competence patterns during the transition to middle school than students without disabilities.
Jekauc et al. (2017)	*PLoS ONE*	Quantitative study. Motorik-Modul Longitudinal. Multiple regression analysis.	The effects of motor abilities on physical activity are rather mediated by self concept.
Siebert et al. (2017)	*International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*	Quantitative study. Survey research. Multiple regression analysis.	Parents' perceived competence of their child's physical ability and parental support were the key factors of promoting physical activity behaviors of children with disabilities.
Curtin et al. (2016)	*Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*	Test–retest reliability study. Structure interviews.	Adolescents (with and without physical disabilities) can reliably report physical activities that they do or do not enjoy. Neither group can report reliably about how good they are at physical activities (self-efficacy).
Kissow (2015)	*Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*	Literature Review	6 themes: socialization through sport, being disabled in an able-bodied society, perception of identity, being part of a community, psychological empowerment, maintenance and independence
Markovic and Bowker (2015)	*Journal of Youth and Adolescence*	Longitudinal study. Questionnaires. Descriptive and Regression analyses	Anxious-withdrawn young adolescents experience greater adversity and less success with peers than their less withdrawn counterparts. Anxious-withdrawn young adolescents who displayed peer-valued characteristics (e.g., physical attractiveness) experience more success with peers than their less withdrawn counterparts.

We identified four main themes from our review of this body of literature: (a) the relationship among self-view, physical ability, and physical activities; (b) physical disability in relation to physical activities; (c) disability identity; and (d) social participation in relation to physical ability. The next sections will describe these four themes. We will conclude with possible research questions and a discussion of areas of intersectionality in identity and experiences research.

3.3.1. The Relationship Among Self-View, Physical Ability, and Physical Activities

One theme from the current literature was how self-view, physical abilities and physical activities influence one another. Some have defined self-concept as "the mental image one has of oneself" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-b) or how a person thinks about himself/herself. In their quantitative study, Jekauc et al. (2017) studied the effects of self-concept, motor abilities, and physical activity. They found that self-concept seems to be an important determinant of adolescents' physical activity, and motor abilities and physical activity affected students' self-concept. Jekauc et al. (2017) also considered physical ability across four domains including strength, endurance, coordination, and flexibility.

Another self-view component addressed in the literature is self-esteem. Definitions of self-esteem included the "confidence and satisfaction in oneself" (Merriam-Webster,

n.d.-c) or how one feels about his/herself. Research has shown that physical activity is an effective way to improve self-concept and self-esteem in youth (Liu et al., 2015). Based on their meta-analysis, (Liu et al., 2015) determined that the setting of a physical activity intervention made a difference in youth self-views. They found stronger effects of physical activity on self-concept and self-esteem in school or gymnasium-based settings than with other settings (e.g., family, detention center, clinic).

Researchers have also investigated young adolescents' perceptions of their own and peers' social behaviors and physical abilities. In their short-term longitudinal study, Markovic and Bowker (2015) had participants complete questionnaires with peer nomination items intended to measure anxious-withdrawal (i.e., shy), peer-valued characteristics, and peer experiences. They found that anxious-withdrawn young adolescents experienced greater adversity and less success with their peers than their less withdrawn counterparts. However, anxious-withdrawn young adolescents who displayed certain peer-valued characteristics (i.e., humor, prosocial behavior, physical attractiveness, athletic ability) were more successful with their peers than their counterparts who were low on these characteristics. Specifically, anxious-withdrawn young adolescents who possessed peer-valued characteristics such as having a sense of humor, being prosocial (for girls), and superior athletic ability (for boys) were more accepted by their peers. In other words, in this study, young adolescents' physical ability was a peer-valued characteristic.

3.3.2. Physical Disability in Relation to Physical Activity

A second theme was how physical disabilities relate to young adolescents' physical activity. Research confirmed that identity is contextual. Kissow (2015) conducted a literature review that revealed six themes regarding this topic: socialization through sport, being disabled in an able-bodied society (physical activity used to demonstrate an image of being competent), perception of identity, being part of a community (participation in team sport), psychological empowerment, maintenance and independence (serving as a means of therapy). Participating in physical activity as an individual with a physical disability could affect experiences beyond the activity itself. Kissow (2015) reported, "...since abilities are further developed through activity in the world, being a participant in physical activity is presumed to promote participation in other social contexts as well." (p. 161). Although the disabilities in the study were not all physical disabilities, Siebert et al. (2017) found that parents influence children's physical activity even more in children with disabilities than those without disabilities. Specifically, parents' beliefs in their child's physical activity skills influenced their physical activity.

Research showed that youth with disabilities can identify barriers to their participation in physical activity Siebert et al. (2017). Based on their interviews with youth, Curtin et al. (2016) determined that youth with intellectual disabilities can reliably report activities that they do or do not enjoy. They could also reliably report their beliefs about physical activity and the perceived benefits of it. In contrast, Curtin et al. found that youth with and without intellectual disabilities cannot reliably respond to questions related to self-efficacy for physical activity. Youth with intellectual disabilities did not reliably report how good they were at individual sports or exercise, and typically developing youth did not respond reliably how good they were at team sports.

Specialized programs such as Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools have been successful in developing supportive and inclusive school environments for students with disabilities (Jacobs et al., 2023). (Jacobs et al., 2023) reported that Unified Champion Schools have implemented full inclusion in school activities such as sports and clubs that led to students' positive experiences with and perceptions of students with disabilities. They also noted the importance of developmentally appropriate physical activities and their

availability for all students. Importantly, Jacobs et al. focused on middle schools that create positive school experiences for all students. They embraced the tenets of the Schools to Watch Program® (National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, 2019), which provides a pathway for middle schools to be academically excellent, developmentally responsive, and socially equitable with the necessary organizational support and processes.

3.3.3. Disability Identity

The third theme from our research was disability identity. This theme included notions of how the disability affected relationships with disabled and non-disabled peers. Research indicated that young adolescents with disabilities struggle with issues related to their identity. Based on their research on middle and high school students, Forber-Pratt et al. (2021) reported, "Adolescents with disabilities wrestle with the formation of their identity, with indications of embracing and rejecting this identity in different places and at different times" (p. 3). While the relationships fell into a realm of externalization, the internalization of identity includes perpetual negotiation of disability, affirmative meaning-making of disability, frustrations about disability, and the hypothetical scenario of a magic pill that would make the disability go away (Forber-Pratt et al., 2021).

Research also focused on how young adolescents with and without disabilities experience adjustment during their first year in middle school (Chen et al., 2020). Based on teachers' ratings and students' self-reports, (Chen et al., 2020) found that students with disabilities and without disabilities "experience adjustment difficulties during the first year of middle school" (p. 188). Teacher ratings of students' interpersonal competence patterns (i.e., Model, Average, Passive, Troubled) differed by gender and ability. Teachers more likely rated boys with disabilities as Passive or Troubled; they were more likely to rate boys without disabilities as Model. Similarly, teachers more likely rated girls with disabilities as Passive or Troubled; they were more likely to rate girls without disabilities as Model. Having these multiple interpersonal patterns of Troubled and Passive patterns was often predictive of "school disengagement, academic failure, and dropout" (Chen et al., 2020, p. 188).

3.3.4. Social Participation in Relation to Physical Ability

A fourth theme centered on the relationship between social participation and physical ability. Research showed that students with intellectual disabilities need physical inclusion for social participation to occur. This dynamic presented a challenge in schools because students with intellectual disabilities spend less than half a day with students without intellectual disabilities (Jacobs et al., 2023). Based on their research, Jacobs et al. (2023) concluded, "Being able to work, learn, and play alongside peers without ID provides normative school experiences to students with ID" (p. 30). They also noted that the Unified Sports strategy provided experiences to strengthen student voices and give students the skills to advance change in schools and communities.

Similarly, Bärwalde et al. (2023) identified interaction as the main phenomenon of social participation. Drawing on interview data from adolescents (with and without disabilities) about their perceptions of social participation, they learned that adolescents perceived social participation as "doing something with others" (p. 146). Bärwalde et al. also found that the social environment was an "aspect central to understanding social participation" (p. 148). Adolescents' sense of well-being and feelings of belonging related to their interactions with people in the social environment and did not differ between adolescents with and without disabilities. Bärwalde et al. concluded, "...social participation appears to represent a part of adolescents' basic needs" (p. 150). In other words, social

interaction among young adolescents with or without disabilities contributes to physical well-being.

3.3.5. Conclusions: Physical Ability and Disability Identity

As with other aspects of identity, "disability identity is not monolithic because the broader disability community is not a homogenous group. Disabilities are diverse, and individuals can have more than one" (Forber-Pratt et al., 2021, p. 551). An interesting characteristic of disability identity is that the individual may not share the trait with members of their family, leading them to find a community elsewhere. Research shows this may not happen until entering college (Forber-Pratt, 2019; Minotti et al., 2021).

One of the alarming findings from our scoping literature review was the scant amount of literature published on young adolescents' physical abilities and disabilities. We did not find disagreement in the literature reviewed given the limited amount of research. Researchers that focused on ability in young adolescents often emphasized cognitive ability rather than physical ability. As Forber-Pratt et al. (2021) stated:

> Disabilities can be apparent, less apparent, or not apparent. Individuals with disabilities may have fluctuating symptoms or be relatively stable. Disability identity development is both deeply personal and linked to community. Some individuals may fiercely reject one aspect of their disability identity while fully embracing another. (p. 553)

In other words, society should not view young adolescents with disabilities universally, as they possess complicated identities.

The fragile and dynamic nature of identity at the young adolescent level requires that educators continuously examine, reflect on, and often update their knowledge and practices to understand and best support the wide and intersecting aspects of young adolescent identity. The articles reviewed in this section begin to address the questions identified through the Middle Level Education Research (MLER) Agenda project to show what gaps remain (see Appendix A). We suggest the next step is for researchers to delve deeper into the complex factors of young adolescent identity and physical ability and disability.

4. Discussion

The findings of our scoping literature review highlighted the importance of future research on the identities and experiences of young adolescents, especially those undertaken through an intersectional lens. Although we approached this review by investigating the literature surrounding gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity, and physical ability and physical disability separately, we also remained cognizant of the need for an intersectional approach to best understand the totality of young adolescent identity and experiences.

4.1. Limitations

Nevertheless, our scoping review has some limitations. By using the Four Layers of Diversity Model (Gardenswartz & Rowe, 2008), we may have missed other categories of identity not represented by this model, such as language and language formation. The model focuses on numerous personal and social categories but does not adequately address the embodied, intersectional nature of identity.

Another limitation is the dearth of research literature focused specifically on young adolescents (ages 10–15 years). Too few studies investigate the identities and experiences of young adolescents. Instead, we find a plethora of research literature reporting on adolescents or adolescents and young adults. Sometimes, these reports include specific findings about young adolescents, but many times, they are subsumed in the adolescent

sample. Furthermore, we rarely find the voices of young adolescents evident in the research literature.

4.2. Implications: Intersectionality

While scholars originally used intersectionality to discuss Black women's unique experiences of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989), the concept is relevant, as it demonstrates that the categories comprising one's identity are not singular but instead are interrelated and compounding. In many ways, to be a young adolescent is in and of itself one component of a human intersectional experience. When it comes to approaching identity intersectionality, Wijeyesinghe and Jones (2014) stated:

> Intersectionality is a powerful tool for understanding, constructing, and deconstructing: the experience of identity, the complex and mutually constituting nature of social identities, the relationships between identity and larger social systems, and the interwoven nature of manifestations of social oppression. (p. 17)

To fully understand and appreciate young adolescents' numerous identities and experiences, it is of crucial importance to employ an intersectional lens. Through an intersectional perspective, the ways that these young people's identities and experiences are connected to broader social, political, and historical systems become evident, offering a more complete and honest picture.

4.3. Implications: Future Research

Given the significant gap in the literature about young adolescents overall, we call on middle level researchers and other interested researchers to systematically study this unique age group. More specifically, we recommend that researchers consider studying young adolescent identity and experiences to not only build the knowledge base but to also inform practice. We invite researchers to address one or more of the key research questions listed in the Young Adolescent Identity and Experiences section of the Middle Level Education Research Agenda Questions (see Appendix A). Importantly, we encourage researchers to seek the voices of young adolescents and those who work with them.

4.4. Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, we need to approach our educational practice and research on young adolescents' identities and experiences in ways that use intersectionality to highlight issues related to power and promote equitable practices that support the flourishing of all young adolescents, including those of socially diverse and historically marginalized identities. To accomplish this goal, we need to work intentionally with practitioners, students, parents, and community members to serve young adolescents well.

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Appendix A. Middle Level Education Research Agenda Questions

Key research questions regarding young adolescent identity and experiences developed for Middle Level Education Research Special Interest Group's Research Agenda project (Brinegar et al., 2024; Caskey et al., 2024).

Appendix A.1. Young Adolescent Identity and Experiences

Appendix A.1.1. Gender and Sexuality

- What are best and next practices for teaching LGBTQ+ young adolescents?
- What school wide approaches and practices support young adolescent gender and sexual identity formation?
- What curricular approaches can be used to address the unique intersectionality of experiences around gender and sexuality?
- What aspects of the curriculum can help prevent body dissatisfaction among young adolescents?
- What are the effects of school-based, identity-focused groups, such as Gay Straight Alliances, in middle schools?
- What school wide policies and practices disrupt LGBTQ+ school victimization and bullying?
- How have current socio-political battles surrounding gender and sexuality affected middle school environments and curriculum?
- How do the various aspects of young adolescents' development affect gender expression, gender identity, and sexuality?
- How do adults and peers both support and hinder LGBTQ+ young adolescents' identity development?
- What is the role of culture and community in young adolescents' gender and sexuality formation?
- What place and influence do role models and mentors have on young adolescents' gender identity development?
- What impacts do social media and peers have on young adolescent sexual and gender identity?
- Given the current socio-political climate, what resources and training are needed to improve middle level educators' comfortability teaching curriculum around gender and sexual identity topics?

Appendix A.1.2. Racial Development

- What meaning do young adolescents make of their own racial identity?
- How do the multiplicities of identity (e.g., intersectionality, multiracialism, whiteness) figure into the conceptualization of young adolescent racial identity development?
- In what ways have schools supported positive racial identity development for young adolescent students of color?
- What are the characteristics and impact of a culturally sustaining advisory curriculum that focuses on supporting positive racial identity development?
- What are the characteristics and impact of a culturally sustaining curriculum that focuses on supporting positive racial identity development?
- What are the experiences and challenges faced by racially diverse young adolescents in and out of school?
- What forms of racial affirmation do young adolescents of color experience in and out of school and how do they impact their racial identity development?
- What forms of racial discrimination and microaggressions do racially diverse young adolescents experience in and out of school?

- What is the impact of racialized trauma on racially diverse young adolescents' academic success and development (i.e., physical, social, emotional, cognitive)
- What knowledge, skills, and dispositions do middle level educators need to support the positive racial identity development of young adolescents of color?
- What forms of professional development have been successful in supporting middle-level educators' cultural competencies and understandings of young adolescent racial identity development?
- How does the current socio-political context impact the racial identity development of young adolescents?
- How does current legislation around curriculum and book banning impact students' understanding of race and racism?

Appendix A.1.3. Physical Ability and Disability

- How does physical ability impact the identity development of young adolescents?
- How does physical ability impact the identity development of young adolescents with disabilities?
- What are the barriers to identity development for young adolescents with disabilities?
- How does physical ability affect young adolescents' overall well-being?
- What is the relationship between young adolescents' physical ability and self-esteem?
- How does physical ability impact the social and emotional well-being of young adolescents with disabilities?
- How do young adolescents with disabilities negotiate their identities in social contexts?
- How can schools promote young adolescents' physical activity?
- How are schools using asset-based approaches to support young adolescents with physical disabilities?
- What school-based programs support young adolescents with physical disabilities?

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