

Teaching Every Body: A Critical Analysis of School Programming on Body Image

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Abstract

Body dissatisfaction in children can grow into harmful practices as they age. Schools often provide education and programming to promote body satisfaction and positive body image in adolescents, but these teachings can be improved. This paper analyzes educational stakeholders' services on body image through a critical lens while suggesting solutions to improve lessons, courses, and programming. Through braiding internal lessons with external programs, schools can fight against the potential risks of negative body image on adolescents. The combined literature review and discussion highlight the need for early education on body image and the importance of caregiver intervention. A critical review of the teacher and student dynamic introduces the opportunity that teachers as caregivers have to promote positive body image. Next, this paper discusses external intervention programs and the effectiveness of gender-specific programming while remaining critical of a lack of male-focused programs. This paper then discusses how teachers have more opportunities for open discussions with students than in external programs. Lastly, this paper describes how physical education classes can be modified to promote feelings of attractiveness and positivity while correcting misconceptions regarding exercising and gender. These changes to school programming will promote positive body image in students and open up classroom conversations.

Introduction

Teachers can influence their students' body image, but iatrogenesis—accidentally causing harm to participants—can encourage teachers to avoid classroom discussions of body image (O'Dea, 2005, p. 26). Body image—how we view ourselves and our appearance—impacts our thoughts and behaviours. While positive body image can drive confidence, negative body image can have severe effects on adolescents: eating disorders, body dissatisfaction, unhealthy weight control practices, and excessive exercise (O'Dea, 2005, p. 11). External factors, like peers and social media, can impact self-image, and schools are an opportunity for students to challenge these negative beliefs. How can schools adapt to communicate better body positivity and mental health awareness in children and youth? Improving and understanding educational stakeholders' services can provide unity on positive body image teachings and views in adolescents. This paper explores the potential braiding of internal classroom practices with external programming by critically analyzing common school resources and classes. This paper addresses the potential for improvement in schools through an in-depth analysis of external intervention programs with a gender-specific focus on

children, teacher involvement, and the need for in-class discussions around body image, and reworking existing classes—health and physical education—to better suit student needs.

Literature Review & Discussion

Parents, social media, and schools all communicate their ideas of “normal” habits and practices, whether these lessons are direct or indirect. From the ages of 10 to 19, adolescents undergo fast physical, emotional, and cognitive development, and primary caregivers influence youth behaviour surrounding anxiety, self-esteem, and self-efficacy (Dahill et al., 2021, p. 2). While parents and guardians impact views of body image in their children, teachers are also caregivers. Schools promote learning, and children gain social skills and learning opportunities while spending significant portions of their days in the classroom. Leaving poor body image unaddressed has extreme consequences—those with poor body image are more likely to have an eating disorder—and body dissatisfaction becomes increasingly harmful as children grow into early adulthood (Sherblom & Rust, 2004, p. 474; Pursey et al., 2021, p. 1760). Intervention and education can help prevent negative body image before it grows detrimental.

In the modern day, critical analysis generally focuses on how members of an organization produce and reproduce domination and exclusion, and open communication creates a foundation of knowledge, experience, and identity (Deetz, 2005, p. 85). The dynamic between student and teacher reinforces a listening and learning relationship that transcends basic curricular teachings. By analyzing meanings, critical studies investigate various topics, including repression, asymmetrical power relations, distorted communication, and misrecognition of interests (Deetz, 2005, p. 86). How schools communicate with their students, influences what students learn. Schools have room for improvement regarding body image, and through critical theory, solutions can be found with resources already in use. Remaining critical of lessons allows teachers and schools to support their students better.

Intervention programs provide schools with an external, educated source that can interact with students and provide space for open discussion. Most interventions focused on primary school-aged children show improvements to body image or weight control behaviours (Pursey et al., 2021, p. 1760). Drawing attention to body positivity and healthy habits shows students that these discussions are important. By visiting a school, intervention programs can impact multiple children at once. However, studies found that programs without gender-specific outcomes or clear learning opportunities were less effective than gender-specific programs with clear goals (Pursey et al., 2021, p. 1760).

In general, the need for focused programming makes sense, but these findings are not well followed in practice. Many programs combine boys and girls into one class or are only girl-specific, meaning there is a lack of boy-focused intervention programs (Pursey et al., 2021, p. 1762). Between the ages of 11 to 12, girls with low self-esteem are at high risk of developing eating disorders in the short term (O’Dea, 2005, p. 22). The potential for harmful effects of negative body image in girls likely drives the focus on girl-specific intervention programs, but negative body image can still harm boys. While research suggests a stronger need for body image intervention in young girls, these programs indirectly assume that boys do not need focused intervention programs. Adolescents’ mental health is a constant concern, and a lack of programming for boys suggests they do not have body image issues or that their issues are not

troubling. The issues discussed in a boy-specific program would differ from a girl-focused program; however, this variation is why gender-specific programming is necessary and more effective.

Critical theory challenges assumptions while recognizing history (Deetz, 2005, p. 91). The believed reason for girl-focused programming is research-based: young girls who feel their bodies do not fit into society's "ideal" are more dissatisfied with their bodies (Winters & Code, 2017, p. 114). All children should learn healthy habits and positive body image practices, and a lack of boy-focused body image programming in schools is a missed opportunity.

However, intervention programs hold several negatives. Programs focused on obesity may indirectly promote body dissatisfaction and extreme weight control behaviours (Pursey et al., 2021, p. 1761). Hyper-fixating on the issue may encourage adolescents to focus on their appearance more and lead to unhealthy responses to perceived weight gain. Intervention programs are often short-term and do not last after three to 12 months (Pursey et al., 2021, p. 1761). Once a facilitator or instructor leaves, students may not discuss or interact with body image issues in school again. External programs provide trained facilitators who are likely more educated than teachers on the subject, but teachers are constantly with their students (Pursey et al., 2021, p. 1762). If teachers and facilitators work together, teachers can apply the program learnings in their classrooms.

Moreover, teachers are vital in providing room for discussion of body image and continuing these beliefs and lessons outside of programs. During an 11-month ethnographic study of an employee assistance program, Chun (2020) recorded classroom discussions after the group watched a YouTube video titled "Anorexia: The 10 Most Common Misconceptions about Eating Disorders" (p. 164). In this setting, students and teachers could challenge and expand on themes surrounding eating disorders (Chun, 2020, p. 165). However, some teachers do not feel qualified or knowledgeable enough to discuss such serious topics with their students. Classrooms open the discussion beyond lectures and allow interaction with the content, but how themes and ideas are presented depends on the teacher (Chun, 2020, p. 178). There is no formula stating how students will absorb body image lessons as individuals react differently, but open discussions give students space to better understand the material.

Habermas argued that conversation follows common beliefs held by the speaker and listener, and if these presumptions fail, the conversation turns into an argument about the validity of what was said (Deetz, 2005, p. 98). To avoid failed communication, one turns to the ideal speech situation: there should be an opportunity for those involved to express themselves, understanding must be free from preconceptions or authority, participants can establish social relations and norms, and those involved must be able to express their feelings in their social-cultural context (Deetz, 2005, p. 99). Dialogue helps further learning and brings ideas of body image to a personal understanding rather than an abstraction. In Chun's (2020) research study, students were encouraged to challenge and question the video in a class discussion with personal views and understandings guiding the dialogue. With a teacher present, an authority figure is leading and facilitating, which can impact how willing students are to respond, but the facilitator must also monitor and mediate. Within a classroom, students are theoretically equal to their peers and can establish norms and beliefs between each other. Chun's study follows many guiding conditions while still allowing a facilitator to guide the discussion. Instead of leaving the conversation to morph into an argument, teachers transformed the questions and challenges

into a learning opportunity regarding eating disorders and body image. Educators are responsible for allowing students to express themselves and interact with their learning in an engaging way that allows the topics to last long-term.

For educators to best support their students' learning of body image, they must understand the impacts of discussing the topic. Teachers often believe their students are comfortable in their bodies and take for granted how much body image impacts student performance (Winters & Code, 2017, p. 126). While ignoring body image issues is harmful, fixating on differences causes distress. Programs can indirectly normalize unhealthy body image habits: dieting, eating disorders, and focus on celebrities (O'Dea, 2005, p. 13). Many practices within the classroom—labeling food as “good” or “bad” or promoting anti-fat messaging—create fear around food and weight (O'Dea, 2005, p. 13). Lessons with clear and focused messaging can help work against harmful practices, but larger school changes can also support healthy body image. Providing children examples of different body shapes in advertising at school and introducing videos or books with diverse characters are subtle ways of reworking what is “normal.” Similarly, self-love messaging in classes can also lead to a positive body image. Through programming focused on positivity—self-acceptance and respect—education can highlight individual uniqueness and bring a focus to individuality rather than body consciousness (O'Dea, 2005, p. 23). Changing the messaging within schools and how language is used around food and self-acceptance are smaller ways to promote positive body image—teaching children they are worthy of life, love, and happiness. Though, these subtle positive messages do not help educate or work against the more severe consequences of negative body image.

Furthermore, Foucault's writing was developed into three periods: archeological (epistemological), genealogical (power), and ethical (individual morality) (Chira, 2019, p. 76). In studying the relationships between the periods, Foucault argued the importance of discipline which claims that individuals internalize communicative customs, and this discipline is dominant in organizations instead of punishment (Taylor, 2005, p. 125). Discipline encourages people to adopt “technologies of the self” to manage their productivity (Taylor, 2005, p. 125). Regarding body image, an example could follow the idea of a student wishing to change their appearance to suit physical characteristics more appealing to their peers. In order to fit in or stop these thoughts from inhibiting their daily lives, adolescents may work to manage their productivity—change their appearance. When individuals work on their productivity, their actions can turn harmful (Taylor, 2005, p. 125). Students who wish to lose weight may turn to eating disorders which could help achieve their goal of thinness, but it will negatively impact their overall health. Teaching positive body image manages students' productivity: students will learn positive habits and possibly gain self-confidence.

As students age, the impacts of negative body image can grow into extremes where physical well-being is threatened (O'Dea, 2005, p. 11). Some people fear that student-athletes are especially at risk of eating disorders since they are in competitive environments where their skills and performance are monitored (Ayala, 2020, p. 170). School sports often have teachers coaching, meaning there is a tie to athletics even in the classroom. The dynamic between teacher and student follows into coaching as the coach's/teacher's role is to mentor and educate. Without acknowledging the impact sports can have on body image, these mentors can miss the opportunity to guide students toward healthier outlooks and habits. Students may feel intense pressure to perform well while on a school sports team, which can impact their

self-perception. However, power is not centralized (Deetz, 2005, p. 91), and influences beyond coaches impact student-athletes. A study on 14 to 18-year-old student-athletes found athletes, on average, were at low risk for eating disorders and negative self-esteem, but most participants in the study were male, and students may not feel comfortable sharing their negative thoughts (Ayala, 2020, pp. 171–172). This result may also change depending on the particular coach. Regardless, being in a competitive environment where the highest effort is expected, it is important to discuss topics such as body image and positivity to ensure students are partaking in the sport for health reasons—not a push for excessive exercise—and so students learn to maintain positive self-talk.

Research surrounding physical education and health classes in grades six through 10 reveals differences in body image in boys and girls during physical activity (Kennedy et al., 2019, p. 471). Required physical education classes for boys led to a decrease in body size perception, which could be considered harmful or positive as smaller builds work against societal standards of attractiveness for men (Kennedy et al., 2019, p. 477). Since physical education and health classes occur year-round, they provide space for discussions of body image both directly and indirectly. The classroom offers a safe space for discussion, but internally students may come to their conclusions based on experience and not a lecture. If students see a particular body type or unhealthy practice as common among their peers, they may be inclined to see the practice as normal. These classes provide space to break harmful ideas through action.

Overall, the study on physical education and health classes revealed that physical education increased boys' self-perceived attractiveness while decreasing girls' self-perceived attractiveness (Kennedy et al., 2019, p. 478). Studies tie some girls' feelings of unattractiveness to concerns about looking sweaty, ruining makeup, or breaking a nail while trying to look impressive for boys (Kennedy et al., 2019, p. 478). The idea that young girls focus on appearing attractive to boys is tied to a social construct of how a girl should look and act. How gender is constructed influences societal practices and beliefs (Allen, 2005, p. 36). Externally, social media may influence adolescents' thinking, but a school provides space to break these preconceptions. In a physical education or health class, teachers can show students healthy ways to remain fit and how remaining in shape looks different on different bodies. Without acknowledging the differences in all bodies, some students may feel singled out and not wish to participate in physical activity. This is directly related to a student's negative body image impacting their performance in school. While remaining physically active was considered attractive to boys, girls did not associate physical activity with femininity—physical activity is tied to muscle and sweat which is generally masculine (Kennedy et al., 2019, pp. 478–479). Breaking the misconception that physical activity makes one look masculine could change female students' views on body image. If physical activity is considered negative, they may feel the need to turn to unhealthy ways of managing weight—dieting and disordered eating. During physical education and health classes, intervention and proper education can fight these misconceptions.

However, social comparison is more prominent in girls, and changing in shared locker rooms encourages comparison (Kennedy et al., 2019, p. 479). How the classes are structured directly impacts the students' willingness and desire to participate. If a class is surrounded by negativity, students will not enjoy the class or feel positive. It is a cycle. Holding adolescent girls'

physical education classes at the end of the day provides the students time to change and shower while avoiding attending classes sweaty (Kennedy et al., 2019, p. 479). However, providing all adolescents with time to shower and change after physical education classes may help with feelings of unattractiveness while teaching them healthy habits. While showering after a physically draining class is a small change, it could impact how students interact with physical education classes, but not all schools have access to showers, and schools often do not provide time for showering. However, physical activity is necessary, and remaining active impacts body image. Not only do classes promoting activity force kids to move, but they also provide opportunities to teach students about their bodies. While health education at school has a small impact on body image, teaching adolescents strategies for positive body image is still essential (Sherblom & Rust, 2004, p. 474). Putting time aside for students to get active and feel clean can encourage students to partake in healthy routines but may also increase comparison between peers.

Limitations

This paper focuses on binary gender—adolescent boys and girls—however, a lack of education around other identities can negatively contribute to self-image. Further research is needed around programming that includes a focus on gender fluid, non-binary, Two-Spirit, and other identities to promote best practices for healthy lifestyles for all students. As well, discussions around student cleanliness and its impact on learning require further research. Providing time and resources for showering after physical activities may encourage healthy practices in students but also increase the opportunity for peer comparison.

Conclusion

Schools are a place for learning, and introducing discussions of body image could braid internal practices—like classroom teachings, health classes, and physical education classes—and external intervention programs to provide a stronger positive view of body image in adolescents. Through critically analyzing internal and external practices in schools, one can determine ways to improve student body image through programs and classes that already exist. Allowing students to learn healthy habits and engage in productive discussion could provide a better school experience and lessen the risk of serious body image issues. Gender-specific programming provides effective results, and programs focused on boys and body image would allow more unity and understanding around mental health, body image, and harmful weight manipulating practices. These practices can continue year-round with proper education for teachers and open discussion with students surrounding self-love messaging. Using physical education and health classes as spaces to talk about body image while providing different activities for students can increase the desire to participate and increase feelings of attractiveness.

Still, causing harm by accident is a concern for teachers in the classroom (O’Dea, 2005, p. 26). Finding a balance between allowing discussion and overly shaming or scaring students into avoiding body types or behaviours is essential in promoting positive body image. Interactive, student-centered learning produces positive effects in programs and lessons

focused on body image (O'Dea, 2005, p. 26). Allowing students a voice and space for interaction with lessons encourages braiding between lecture and life. Schools can improve their lessons and programs once they start conversations about body image and diversity in the classroom.

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