National Eating Disorder Information Centre

BULLETIN

Vol. 29, No. 4 ISSN 08366845 October 2014

# Body Equity – a concept long overdue

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*Imagine this scenario. A grade four student approaches the teacher at the start of a nutrition break and asks, "Miss, if I eat this carrot, will it make me fat?" What, in this case, is the optimal teacher response?*

This scenario is not imaginary but real and did cause the teacher to hesitate in order to consider the most sensitive and helpful way to respond. Like parents, health professionals, and other community leaders, teachers want to answer questions about food in manners that affirm students without contributing to the already-present angst about looking a certain way that is perpetuated by society, including the media and peers.[1] For example, should the teacher address the student's fear of being fat directly? Talk about the stigma associated with the word *fat*? Focus on nutrition? Explain that people can be healthy at every size? Those teachers who have some understanding of body image issues recognize that *how* teachers, parents and other caregivers respond to questions about food that are related to body weight and size, can impact students' perceptions about themselves and others. We all need to know the key messages of body-positive support so we can respond to these questions in ways that enhance body awareness and self-esteem, and encourage health without causing harm.

In some Canadian provinces and territories, teachers are provided with more official support for answering body-based questions than in others. Some provinces, for example, have curriculum policies that include topics such as body diversity, body image, and critical media literacy. They address societal messages such as weight- and size-based stigma, and body-based prejudice. These provinces offer a comprehensive body image curriculum stream with key topics each year building on the understandings from previous years and based on children's developmental stages. In this way, children and adolescents in these provinces are better equipped to espouse body diversity and size acceptance as their bodies change over time and as they experience social pressures. Regrettably, however, across many of the provinces and territories, opportunities for teachers and students to acquire understandings about body image are offered on a much less consistent basis, or not at all.[1] Fortunately for them, despite the policy gaps, body-positive curriculum messages are provided by caring and informed teachers, health practitioners, and others.

Diversity in aspects other than the body has become more acknowledged in recent decades. Canadian teachers must make the curriculum adapt to an increasingly complex and pluralist society. Students' genders, cultures, religions, countries of origin and socio-economic circumstances all influence their learning needs. In order to meet their needs, curriculum materials must be inclusive and reflect the nation's diversity. Not everyone learns the same way, so teachers need to tailor the curriculum for all subjects to fit diverse student needs. In order to personalize the health and physical education (PE) curriculum specifically, schools need to examine all aspects of the curriculum including: the written or formal curriculum; the settings where PE teaching occurs; and the hidden or more subtle curric-

Funded by Mental Health Programs and Services, Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care. A Program of the University Health Network.
The opinions expressed in the Bulletin do not necessarily reflect those of the above organizations.

ulum messages (such as the value of sport participation relative to other activities like yoga and walking). Presently there are school policies in Canada which support equity, diversity and differentiation of the curriculum but have yet to adequately recognize the body as an area of equity.

In other words, one aspect of what is missing is policy identifying body diversity as part of an inclusive curriculum. When teachers speak about an inclusive curriculum now, the most common areas of advantage and disadvantage that come to mind are the more-established grounds for discrimination in Canada such as gender, race, religion, culture, sexual orientation and age. Yet, Canadians are naturally diverse in body sizes and shapes, as well as in their physical abilities and the ways that they like to be active. A pan-Canadian approach to body equity[2] would present body size, shape, physical abilities and activity interests *as areas of diversity*, just as gender, race, religion, and class are. Schools would benefit from the support of policy requiring *body equitable* schooling approaches for a diverse population. In this scenario, policy would require that all bodies would be nurtured for optimal health and well-being, and school sites would be required to address body-based prejudice and discrimination. At the most critical level, school leaders would identify and examine how PE classes and school sports can feed into and perpetuate body-based inequalities[3] and consider how whole-school approaches to health that honour students of all sizes would be more inclusive.

If body size, shape and ability become recognized as areas of equity, then teaching students that natural diversity is *expected* would become a part of the health and PE curriculum, shifting the focus away from personal responsibility to maintain a standardized weight and shape. Diverse bodies would not only be in the health and PE curriculum – they would be represented in all areas of the curriculum, showing that body size is irrelevant to being an important and respected contributor in society. Incidents of body-based discrimination and stigmatization would become more recognized but less tolerated. The curriculum would also change as it became more inclusive because schools would have the encouragement and support to develop more individualized and personalized approaches to educating *about* and *for* all different body types.

In a body-equitable school, instead of focusing on size and shape norms, the focus would be on the benefits of physical activity for every body type and ability. Instead of focusing on personal responsibility to meet standardized measures (such as body mass index), school programs would acknowledge societal changes such as more sedentary jobs and car-dependent communities. The curriculum would recognize how genetics and age can impact body shape and size as well as lifestyle. Schools would focus on finding and celebrating many more ways to be active than school sports teams. Students would be encouraged to consider these issues in complex rather than simplistic terms. Students would be taught about nutrition but also would be encouraged to think critically about differences in access to healthy food and safe recreation spaces, rather than how to use technology to count calories. This type of body-equitable programming is already in place in some jurisdictions and with some schools and teachers.[1] A curriculum for body diversity is the right of every Canadian student. In order for it to be realized as an equity area, it needs the weight of policy.

It may be helpful for others in the health field to know that health and PE programs today are built on earlier versions of the curriculum. Canadian PE programs were first designed for preparation for military service,[4] and some elements of early fitness regimes continue to this day. Health classes first focused on disease prevention and on telling students what *not* to do (do not smoke, do drugs or have unprotected sex, for example). More traditional curriculum approaches connect "healthy" with a certain body size and shape. The dominant paradigm of competition in PE leaves students who are not strong athletes out of the active choices. Students with body image and self-esteem issues can find it hard to "see" themselves in the curriculum and are often reluctant to participate in PE class. In addition, much of the curriculum prior to the turn of the century spoke of an individual's responsibility to be a certain size and had a moralistic

tone, which still echoes when people refer to "good" and "bad" food choices.

In recent years, there has been a call for teachers to change the main focus of PE classes to physical literacy[5] which includes fostering student interest in physical activity. In health programs, there has been a shift to empower students to make more informed choices. While these initiatives are helpful, one dominant voice in health and physical education continues to rally for self-improvement through exercise and fitness. There is insufficient recognition of the risks involved in motivating students by having them weigh and check themselves. There are also risks associated with strong perfection codes and over-regulation in schools.[6] A more body-positive curriculum would help teachers who are caught in the middle of these messages of body acceptance and encouraging students to be fit. Teachers want students to be healthy, fit and active for life, but they do not want to increase any student's risk for developing an eating disorder.

A group of researchers and teachers have created a website, **www.teachbodyimage.com** which provides fundamental body equity messages for teachers, parents, and interested professionals. The chart provided here is adapted from one of the research studies on the website and compares the more traditional health and physical education curriculum programs of the past with key aspects of a visionary body-equitable curriculum.

| Traditional curriculum | A body-equitable curriculum |
|---|---|
| Health is related to body size and a healthy weight means a healthy life. Self-esteem is linked to body size and shape. There is a focus on lifestyle in exclusion of the other determinants of health, and a "calories in and out" approach to weight and size – both of which focus singularly on personal responsibility. | A natural diversity of size and shape occurs in the general population so it is expected and discussed. Health includes physical, social, and emotional health and many aspects of holistic health contribute to self-esteem. It does not make sense to compromise one aspect of your health for another therefore restricting eating (diets) are harmful. Bodies give signals about needs for activity, rest, thirst and food. People can be healthy at different sizes and many factors contribute to a healthy lifestyle. |
| A traditional approach to curriculum perpetuates the view that it is a personal responsibility to improve (change) your body to be healthy. Body weight and performance should be monitored for conformity. Self-esteem is connected to appearance and by body size. | Genetics, built-environment, hormones, age, and lifestyle are all factors in overall health. We need to alter our school facilities, neighbourhoods, and society so that more people have opportunities to eat for optimal nutrition and have options for safe and enjoyable physical activity. Physical activity is important to health, and schools need to find ways to engage every student in creating lifetime activity habits, especially students who are not interested in sports or who are reluctant to participate. |
| In the past, it was thought that body image concerns affected only a small percentage of adolescent girls. In a traditional curriculum, certain sizes and shapes are desirable. | Society's current preferred shapes occur naturally in just a small percentage of the population, leading to high rates of body dissatisfaction. Media portrayal of the thin or highly-muscular body as normal is not helpful and schools need to help deconstruct this. Pressure to look a certain way impacts girls and boys in many negative ways. |
| A traditional, single-dimension stance focuses on measuring and identifying if some bodies differ from the standard. Difference needs to be remediated through diet and exercise. There is a focus on continuous body improvement.<br><br>Obesity is a social problem with an individual lifestyle solution. | Weight-based stigma and stereotypes are forms of prejudice that limit potential, can result in exclusion and bullying, and are not tolerated. Students hear that their bodies are acknowledged, respected and planned for in the curriculum. Students critically examine how diet, exercise, and personal appearance industries stand to gain from body-based dissatisfaction. Social pressure to be a certain size can be resisted through deconstruction, awareness, and empowerment. There are many social determinants of health to be recognized and addressed. Body equity, physical literacy, and critical health literacy support individual empowerment. |

As is the case with all areas of equity, a body-equitable curriculum is much more complex than a single intervention program or a topic in one grade of the curriculum can address. Implementation of body equity in schools should not be placed solely on the shoulders of teachers. It requires a much more comprehensive Canadian policy response to create systemic change. Realizing the vision of a more body-equitable school curriculum will be a challenging but dynamic task, and one that is more than overdue.

**Notes**

1. For a review of body image in Canadian curriculum policies, see: Robertson, L. & Thomson, D. (2012). "Be"ing a certain way: Seeking *Body Image* in Canadian health and physical education curriculum policies. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 35 (2), 334-354. Canadian Society for the Study of Education.
2. The origin of the term "body equity" is thought to be : Rice, C., & Larkin, J. (2001). Mainstreaming body equity: Critical approaches to preventing body dissatisfaction and eating disorders in middle-school girls. In *109th Annual Conference of the American Psychological Association, San Francisco*.
3. For a discussion on the role of teachers in this respect see for example: Yager, Z. & O'Dea, J. (2005). The role of teachers and other educators in the prevention of eating disorders and child obesity: What are the issues? *Eating Disorders.* 13. 261-278.
4. For a review of PE policy see: Thomson, D. & Robertson, L. (2014). Fit for What? From War Games to Desk Jobs: An Analysis of Physical Education Curriculum Policies in Canada. *Critical Studies (in press)*.
5. For more on physical literacy, see the PHE Canada website: http://www.phecanada.ca/programs/physical-literacy

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A leading expert in child development, education and family relationships, international speaker and author of "The Big Disconnect: Protecting Childhood and Family Relationships in the Digital Age".

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