



Beyond Body Binaries: An Intersectional Approach to Combating Weight Stigma

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DISORDERED EATING AMONG 2SLGBTQI+ YOUTH

Historically, it was believed that only young, white, cisgender females struggle with eating disorders. However, research has proven that anyone, regardless of age, body size, class, gender, race, and sexuality can experience an eating disorder.

Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and other individuals with gender- and sexually-diverse identities (2SLGBTQI+) face unique marginalizations and stressors due to chronic experiences of gender- and sexuality-based stigma, discrimination, and victimization. Commonly referred to as minority stress (Hendricks & Testa, 2012), these experiences result in decreased mental well-being and a higher probability of developing an eating disorder, with body dissatisfaction and disordered eating often manifesting during adolescence and young adulthood (Goldhammer et al., 2019).

Compared to their cisgender heterosexual peers, lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth engage in restrictive eating at rates three times higher, and diet pill use and purging at rates five times higher; meanwhile, rates of transgender and gender nonconforming youth restricting, fasting, purging, or taking laxatives are 2.9 to 8.9 times higher (Lawrence et al., 2023). Notably, gender-diverse youth face multifaceted

potential sources of distress, such as an intertwined experience of gender dysphoria and weight-related concerns which drive changes in eating and exercise behaviours in pursuit of affirmed gender presentation. For example, studies have shown that trans and gender-diverse youth assigned female at birth may engage in restrictive eating behaviours to reduce chest or hip size in pursuit of gender affirmation. Furthermore, resulting biological changes, such as amenorrhea, may reduce gender dysphoria (McGregor et al., 2023). Along with internal perception of one's gender, external pressures to conform to gender expectations—such as “passing” as cisgender or appearing androgynous—can further motivate disordered eating practices. Given the real concerns of transphobia, “passing” can facilitate safety from more direct forms of discrimination and gender-based violence (Pham et al., 2023). Discrimination-based trauma symptoms were found to be the strongest predictor for eating disorder pathology in trans and nonbinary adults (Urban et al., 2023).

In addition to bullying based on sexual identity, 2SLGBTQI+ youth experience higher rates of bullying based on other social identities such as race, body weight/size, and socioeconomic status compared to their cisgender, heterosexual peers (Gower, 2021; Lawrence et al., 2023).

2SLGBTQI+ youth who experience body-based bullying at school demonstrate higher rates of maladaptive eating, increased stress, poorer sleep, and higher physical activity levels. With overlapping experiences of minority stress, disordered eating is particularly pervasive among youth of multiple marginalized social identities (e.g., sexual/gender minority, larger/higher-weight body, racialized identity, disability) (Lawrence et al., 2023). For example, disordered eating was found to be most prevalent in gender-diverse youth in larger bodies (Lawrence et al., 2023).

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Protective factors, including family connectedness, school connectedness, caring friends, and social support, help mitigate the influence of bullying and discrimination, with family connectedness corresponding with the lowest probabilities of disordered eating for transgender youth ages 14 to 18 (Watson et al., 2016). Additional factors that contribute to a supportive community climate include (Gower, 2021):

- Having a gay-straight/gender-sexuality alliance (GSA);
- Anti-bullying policies that specifically name gender and sexual orientation;
- Ensuring the presence of visual cues (e.g., pride flags);
- Hosting awareness campaign events that help destigmatize identities and experiences, and advocate for policy changes.

Given distal stressors like stigma and discrimination and proximal stressors like internalized homophobia/transphobia and concealment of sexual/gender identity (Parker & Harriger, 2020), eating disorder preventive strategies must be grounded in an intersectional framework, attending to gender identity, body-based bullying and weight stigma, and self-esteem. We must aim to cultivate more weight-inclusive and gender-inclusive norms, such that school wellness programs emphasize health rather than weight, and staff/students' chosen names and correct pronouns are respected regardless of

how their body conforms to gender expectations (Lawrence et al., 2023). Additionally, using body neutrality approaches for transgender and gender-diverse youth and youth of multiple marginalized social identities may be especially important given multifaceted sources of potential distress (Lawrence et al., 2023). Body neutral and intersectional approaches will enable shifting the larger school environment and cultural norms experienced among students, school personnel and educators, and families, and mitigate health disparities.

NEDIC OVERVIEW

NEDIC has been dedicated to providing support to 2SLGBTQI+ individuals through its helpline services, resources, and school-based prevention efforts. NEDIC's helpline is a pillar of support for individuals affected by disordered eating nationwide. For many folks, reaching out to NEDIC's helpline was a first step in exploring recovery. Between April 2023 and March 2024, the helpline services, which include telephone and live chat support, were accessed by youth over 1500 times, approximately six percent of whom identified as gender-diverse. While individuals are more likely to disclose their gender identity than their sexual identity, some may abstain from sharing both. Thus, it is likely that more 2SLGBTQI+ youth connected with the helpline than statistics report.

Understanding that dominant narratives about disordered eating often exclude the experiences of 2SLGBTQI+ community, NEDIC collaborated to develop *Affirming Care for Every Body*, a resource for the 2SLGBTQI+ community, written by community members. It explores the unique journeys through disordered eating experienced by 2SLGBTQI+ individuals and emphasizes self-advocacy. Since its release in 2021, this resource has been accessed on NEDIC's website over 7000 times.

NEDIC has implemented a whole-school approach to delivering prevention-based workshops. These workshops aim to engage school communities at all levels in building resilience against appearance-based pressures and fostering an appreciation for diversity among youth. In 2023, NEDIC delivered 58 live sessions to over 3400 students, educators, and staff across Canada.

CCGSD OVERVIEW

For 19 years, the Canadian Centre for Gender and Sexual Diversity (CCGSD) delivered educational programming and advocacy across Canada to empower gender and sexually diverse communities. Their Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) Program offered workshops, training and resources for youth and educators on topics ranging from gender and sexuality, to healthy relationships and consent, to safer sex, and more.

After years of work aiming to build a world free of discrimination, the CCGSD closed its doors permanently in September 2024.

While CCGSD prided itself in a robust program with a variety of topics and content to meet the needs of many grade levels, one of its most noticeable gaps was inclusive approaches to talking about body image and weight stigma, particularly in intersection with other marginalized identities. Between 2022 and 2024, the CCGSD's CSE Program worked in collaboration with NEDIC to develop and deliver the Beyond Body Binaries workshop. Former CSE Program Coordinator, Janani Suthan, is grateful for the opportunity to have built such an impactful learning opportunity alongside NEDIC.

BEYOND BODY BINARIES

NEDIC approached CCGSD with a proposal to collaborate to merge the expertise of both organizations, to create a workshop for students that helps them learn how to identify ways in which weight stigma intersects with other systems of oppression, and how these can all be challenged alongside one another. CCGSD would be able to provide thought leadership on how to talk to youth about intersectionality, identity, and how marginalizations overlap and influence one another to create unique experiences. NEDIC would be able to provide guidance on how to approach conversations on weight stigma, body image, beauty standards, and combating weight-based discrimination. Bringing these topic areas together brought us to the workshop *Beyond Body Binaries: An introduction to body image, health and identity (BBB)*.

CONTENT DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

Janani, former Comprehensive Sexuality Education Program Coordinator at CCGSD, and Emily Huynh, Community Engagement Facilitator at NEDIC, co-constructed *BBB*, informed by the curricular needs of students grades 7 to 12 in Ontario regarding body image, healthy eating, bullying and discrimination, gender and sexuality, and identity.

The development process began by reviewing Ontario's Health and Physical Education curriculum for grades 7 to 12 (Ministry of Education, 2019; Ministry of Education, 2015), identifying where the above topics are covered, in what nature, and in which grades. Doing this allowed us to ensure that the workshop aligned well with curriculum outcomes (which increases teacher buy-in) and that the content was appropriate for the grade level(s) the workshop was intended for. We noticed a trend in the curriculum promoting "healthy eating" and physical activity at many grade levels. While there was some mention of factors that influence health and wellbeing, there was no distinct connection between health and social identity (class, race, etc). There were some mentions of bullying, harassment, and discrimination, but they were not often connected to specific types of discrimination. Many of the ways that health was covered in this curriculum emphasized personal decision-making and choices, such as with eating and exercise. Factors that are out of a person's control that determine health, weight, wellbeing, and more were often neglected.

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This led the team to include understanding the Social Determinants of Health (SDoH) as a key learning outcome of the workshop, thereby empowering students with knowledge on diverse factors outside of personal choice that can influence our health, and de-pathologizing health disparities. With this emphasis, we were able to introduce intersectionality by building students' understanding of how discrimination based on weight and size often also intersects with other types of discrimination. Explaining intersectionality was important to ensuring students understood how beauty standards are connected with other oppressive systems like racism, misogyny, transphobia, ableism, and classism.

The team identified through the curriculum review, as well as anecdotally through facilitating workshops, that media analysis was an important skill-building opportunity when unpacking weight stigma. Social media can be a breeding ground for perpetuating weight stigma and discrimination at various intersections. Building on this, the workshop took students through a 'case study' of Sam Smith's more recent music videos and the backlash they received for their forms of expression, contrasted with a general acceptance of other thinner and cis celebrities (e.g., Harry Styles who was used as the counter-example). Students were encouraged to interrogate why one celebrity was the target of fatphobic, transphobic, and homophobic comments while the other has been praised for breaking gender stereotypes in their gender expression and performance. This allowed students to see a real-life example of how weight stigma can intersect with transphobia and homophobia to perpetuate further violence against 2SLGBTQI+ fat people. This example can be extrapolated to how a person may experience compounded discrimination if they are also racialized, disabled, poor, or are of another marginalized identity.

Fundamentally, *BBB* builds students' knowledge around the social factors that influence health and body image, employs an intersectional analysis of beauty standards and a hierarchy of bodies, and strengthens their media literacy skills when it comes to fatphobia and other forms of discrimination on social media. All of this connects directly to health curriculum outcomes for grades 7 to 12.

INSIGHTS

The exploration of topics surrounding intersectionality, SDoH, and the hierarchy of bodies within *BBB* has offered us several insights regarding the fit of the content, persisting challenges and future opportunities to support students and educators in navigating such conversations.

We have noticed students from grades 7 to 10 demonstrating a considerable grasp of the material. Many students can identify and locate factors impacting health and body image within the circles of influence and reflect on how gender and racial identity shape beauty standards. These observations have helped shift our target audiences, expanding our reach to include grades 7 and 8. This expansion was prompted by early requests from educators who recognized the importance of addressing these concerns at a younger age when instances of bullying and discrimination typically begin to surface. Not only have these discussions revealed a critical need for meaningful dialogue addressing the emergence of body and identity-based bullying, many educators have indicated the topics explored in *BBB* fit seamlessly into conversations already being had within the classroom.

However, challenges persist, notably in application. In general, students have particular difficulties applying the concepts of intersectionality and the hierarchy of bodies to media analysis, as well as their own behaviour. During the media analysis activity, rarely are students able to draw connections between Sam Smith's body size and 2SLGBTQI+ identity, and the hateful responses they received online without further prompting from facilitators. We suspect this difficulty may stem from broader sociopolitical currents, including prevalent homophobia and transphobia in online spaces and within the classroom. If these systems of discrimination are persistent in their communities, students may feel less comfortable reflecting honestly and openly with their peers or attempting to challenge these systems. Noting the contextual nuances of each school environment is key to guiding the facilitator's approach to the workshop, so they can better address prevailing attitudes of students and educators in the space.

Looking ahead, we see opportunities to further embed *BBB* within a prevention-based framework, positioning it as a valuable resource for educators seeking support in addressing persistent issues of bullying and discrimination – for example, bringing attention to this workshop as a supplementary resource to existing educator professional development. Our hope is twofold; firstly, it will encourage educators and school staff to request these workshops so that we can facilitate these conversations with students directly, and secondly, it will empower educators and school staff to continue these conversations independently. Through this, all members of the school community can actively contribute to fostering an inclusive school culture that promotes respect and tolerance.

In conclusion, *BBB* has proven to be a valuable resource in fostering understanding and dialogue around complex social issues such as intersectionality, SDoH, and the hierarchy of bodies among youth and adolescent audiences. By remaining responsive to the evolving needs and contexts of Canadian schools, we can continue to cultivate environments where all students feel safe, supported, and empowered to respect their own body and challenge harmful norms.

If you are interested in bringing *Beyond Body Binaries* to your school, please visit: [NEDIC - Community Education: Workshops for High School Students](#)

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