

“Stop Photoshopping!”: A Visual Participatory Inquiry Into Students’ Responses to a Body Curriculum

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In today’s school climate of accountability, researchers in Physical Education (PE) pedagogy have contested current fitness curricula that aim to manage, control, and normalize young people’s bodies. This participatory visual research incorporated a *Body Curriculum* into a fitness unit in a secondary school (a) to assist young people critically deal with the media narratives of perfect bodies they consume in their daily lives, and (b) to examine how participants responded to a *Body Curriculum*. It was found that while participants rejected media fabrications of the “ideal body” and the “unhealthy” ideals they circulate in society, they recognized the difficulty of not being “caught up” in media storytelling. Participants’ views of their own bodies, however, were not malleable, but rooted in narrow, fixed heteronormative white ideals of “looking a certain way” to “fit” society norms of physical appearance and attractiveness. The benefits and limitations of implementing a *Body Curriculum* are recognized.

Keywords: visual research, gender/race, embodiment, pedagogy, physical culture

In today’s school climate of accountability, several researchers in Physical Education (PE) pedagogy have contested current health and fitness curricula that aim to manage, control, and normalize young people’s bodies (Cliff & Wright, 2010; Evans, Rich, Davies, & Allwood, 2008; Macdonald, 2011). Rather than using schools as a site of transformation around social justice issues, contemporary top-down, health-related research interventions are reclaiming physical education (PE), which has traditionally had a low-status in schools (Ennis, 2006), as a corporate vehicle for simply managing young people’s body weight (Azzarito, 2009). However, although researchers’ valuable findings have shown the many side effects of young people’s lack of critical education about the body (Burrows, Wright, & Jungersen-Smith, 2002; Drummond, 2003; Evans et al., 2008), school PE continues to do little “body work.” As Cliff and Wright (2010, p. 230) point out, while there are some good examples of scholars working with young women with regard to body-related issues (i.e., Fiset, 2011; Oliver & Lalik, 2004) and sociocultural understanding of physical activity (Enright & O’Sullivan, 2012a; 2012b; Kinchin & O’Sullivan, 1990), research that deals specifically with both girls’ and boys’ body issues from a sociocultural

perspective in PE is, for the most part, currently underdeveloped.

There is a need to adopt a sociocultural perspective that critically interrogates the ways that local fitness-driven school PE curricula continue to be colonized by normative global gendered and racialized media narratives of healthy and fit bodies. If not problematized, these current curricula could have potentially damaging consequences for the ways that young people view, understand, and act on their bodies (Cliff & Wright, 2010; Keller, Fleury, Perez, Ainsworth, & Vaughan, 2008). Public health discourses about young people’s unhealthy bodies on the one hand, and the media construction of ideal bodies on the other, create implicit cultural hierarchies of the body (e.g., normal/fit or abnormal/fat bodies), that may contribute to young people’s internalization of negative feelings, dissatisfaction with their bodies, eating disorders (Tiggermann, 2005) or over exercise (Wykes & Gaunter, 2010). To further understand relationships among the media, embodiment, and inequalities, the purpose of this research was to explore the extent to which the creation and implementation of a *Body Curriculum* into a fitness unit in a secondary school enhanced students’ critical embodied learning. In this participatory study, researchers collaborated with a secondary school teacher to implement a *Body Curriculum*, a student-centered curriculum that incorporated critical pedagogies. This curriculum aimed to encourage students to construct themselves as active, social, reflective, and critical learners in physical culture.

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From Constructivist PE to a Body Curriculum

Today's fitness and health crusades in schools blame young people for a "failure" to take responsibility over their health (Wright & Harwood, 2009) while stripping their right to construct their physicality through a holistic education of the body and homogenizing young people's body experiences to certain ideals of size and shape embedded in whiteness. To address contemporary issues in physical culture, school physical education should be used for more than body management, regulation, and discipline. Against the rise of corporate curriculum (Azzarito, 2009), what is needed is research that invests in schooling as a *transformative and equitable* site of physical culture for young people. The creation and implementation of a student-centered PE curriculum informed by a critical perspective might function not to classify, regulate or narrowly define young people in physical culture in school, but rather to *enable* them to become critical and reflective learners. Conducting research on the extent to which PE curricula that integrate students' "body work" (Howson, 2007) by using the visual enhances students' critical and authentic embodied learning might create possibilities for tackling issues of the body in school and create sites for social change.

In the past twenty years, researchers have made significant efforts to develop theory-based curricula to engage young people in meaningful experiences in sport-based PE (Azzarito, 2003; Dyson et al., 2004; Ennis, 2000; Siedentop, 2002). A number of contemporary curriculum models such as Sport Education, Sport for Peace, Self-Social Responsibility, and Tactical Games for Understanding (TGFU) offer alternative and holistic visions of physical education for young people. These models are all student-centered curricula informed by constructivist theories that aim to engage students in active, authentic and meaningful learning in PE. Promoting students' problem-solving, cooperative work, responsibilities and roles, and the use of modified games/sports are all central pedagogical principles of these student-centered curricula. Another important aim of these models is to create an inclusive learning environment that accounts for students' diverse prior experiences. Lastly, engendering "competitive, literate and enthusiastic sport players" (Hastie, 2003) is an additional crucial learning outcome.

Researchers have reported that students' responses to these constructivist curricula are generally positive (Azzarito, 2003; Ennis, 2000; Dyson et al., 2004; Siedentop, 2002). While this line of research is important, as it aims to create active and social learners through cooperation and collaboration, it has shortcomings. For instance, none of the above PE curricula incorporate critical pedagogies or address issues of social justice. There is a need to continue to develop PE curricula that attempt to engender creative and critical learners in physical culture. Creating critical learners is important

considering that sport in society is often racist, sexist, classist and homophobic. In theorizing youths' embodiments of gender, social class and race, Kirk (1999, p. 71) proposes "recast[ing] the notion of young people's participation in physical activity as engagement of young people with physical culture". Physical culture concerns the ways people cultivate the body-self as an active physical corporeal process; this process, however, is situated and contingent upon the individual's opportunities, sense of choice and desires.

While current constructivist curricula emphasize students' engagement with sport culture, they do not enable young people to deal reflectively and critically with body narratives in contemporary physical culture, often ingrained in stereotypes of race, gender/sex, social class and ability. The body, as Shilling (2006) emphasizes, is deeply implicated in inequality, and "has become, and not for the first time, a metaphor for the fitness and health of the nation" (p. 27). Even with the premise of authentic, student-centered learning, none of the existing constructivist PE curriculum models (Sport Education, Sport for Peace, Self-Social Responsibility, or TGFU) aim to engage students in critically examining the messages about fitness and health that bombard them in their daily lives. Differently from contemporary constructivist curricula, body-focused curricula in school PE (Armour, 1999) might give particular attention to critical body pedagogies (Cliff & Wright, 2010) that can empower young people (Kincheloe, 2005) to critically consider, reflect upon, and negotiate health and fitness imperatives bearing upon their bodies.

Incorporating a Critical Perspective on the Body in PE

Researchers, for instance, stress that concerns around the obesity epidemic, eating disorders, and media imperatives inform the school culture, and have damaging consequences on the ways young people view, understand and act on their bodies (Burrows et al., 2002; Cliff & Wright, 2010). To address current obesity trends, the urgent demand for fitness in schools has produced a "corporate curriculum," a curriculum model that narrowly aims to manage, monitor, and discipline young people's body weight (Azzarito, 2009, p. 104). Corporate curricula are top-down, monocultural, acontextual, fitness-based interventions in schools that aim to homogenize young people to a normative body size embedded in white ideals. Because corporate curricula do not address, but rather implicitly hinder, conversation about issues of social justice and the body in school (Azzarito, 2009), what is needed is a curriculum that enables young people to "speak up" about their subjective experiences of the body. What is needed is a curriculum that can recognize and mobilize young people's agency to deal with, critically reflect upon and negotiate their embodiment of gender, race, and social class in the context of fitness.

In the past decade, a number of scholars have advocated for the promotion of “body work” in PE (Evans et al. 2008) to enable young people to critically read pervasive media-driven messages about the ideal body they encounter in their daily lives (Fisette, 2011; Oliver & Lalik, 2004), and thus to help them manage the often impossible expectations of normative body size and shape the media circulates in society. For instance, Fisette (2011), considering the pressure the media places on young people to conform to normative gendered ideals of the body, worked with adolescent girls to help navigate and negotiate images of the idealized female body fabricated by the media. Notably, the PE class in the study was constructed as a learning environment in which girls felt comfortable and safe to think critically about and express their embodied identities. Other scholars have worked with adolescent girls in the context of Irish secondary schools to help them “speak for themselves” about their embodied learning (Enright & O’Sullivan, 2012b), and organized a school-based photo exhibition of girls’ representation of their subjective experiences of the body and their own perspectives on “how to get more girls active” (Enright, 2013). As Oliver (2010) suggested, “by listening and learning from students’ perspectives we begin to see the particular experiences of their own words from their points of view” (p. 2).

In line with the aims of this research (Enright, 2013; Fisette, 2011; Oliver, 2010), this paper argues for constructing learning environments that allow and encourage young people to critically explore their embodied identities, and express their sense of the self in physical culture. However, differently from previous literature on girls’ issues of embodiment (Enright & O’Sullivan, 2012b; Fisette, 2011; Oliver, 2010), this study implemented a *Body Curriculum* to encourage both girls and boys in PE coeducational classes to critically read media narratives of the body and express their embodied identities. Today’s emphasis on health and fitness, when delivered as a corporate curriculum in PE, might reclaim, strengthen, and cement, rather than dismantle, destabilize, and subvert, the heteronormative category of gender/sex (Moore, 2010) at the intersection of race (Azzarito, 2009). Thus, the *Body Curriculum* research reported in this paper was conducted with both girls and boys to encourage critical reading of media texts in coeducational settings.

The Body Curriculum From Third Wave Feminist Theoretical Standpoints

To enhance girls’ and boys’ critical views on their embodied learning, the theoretical assumptions of *Body Curriculum* were informed by third wave feminist theoretical standpoints (i.e., poststructural, queer, and feminist theories) (Butler, 1990; Howson, 2004; McLaren, 2002). In today’s increasingly globalized society, the media implicitly construct and stabilize gender/sex through dominant visual representation of the ideals of slender feminine bodies in opposition to muscular masculine

bodies. Dominant heteronormative discourses around the body, gender, and sexuality produced in society regulate, discipline, and shape the ways in which young people speak, write, think, and “see” their ideals of the body (McLaren, 2002). Discourse refers to the complex relations of power/knowledge that produce “absolute truths” about the body, which become institutionalized in society and embodied by people. In other words, embodiment is a process through which girls and boys internalize cultural ideals of the body, consciously or unconsciously, constructing knowledge about who they are in relation to others in PE, sport, health, and fitness contexts. However, from a standpoint of third wave feminist theory, gender/sex is neither a dichotomy nor a fixed category, but a fluid notion that intersects with other identity categories (McLaren, 2002). Moving away from a biological understanding of gender/sex, queer, poststructural, and feminist theories conceptualize gender/sex as a cultural, historical, and political category that molds people’s embodiment and their bodily expression of ideals of femininity or masculinity (Butler, 1990). From this theoretical view, children and young people are positioned as agents who take an active role in the “gendering process,” embodying and performing “genders” in a wide range of ways (Francis & Skelton, 2008). Recently, feminist scholars have advocated for engaging young people in the research process to provide a sociocultural pedagogical space that can enable both girls and boys to recognize, name, and challenge dominant discourses of the body and gender/sex, and to critically examine their embodiment, which opens up possibilities to transform inequitable power relations (Blaise, 2005). Therefore, in this study, throughout the implementation of the *Body Curriculum*, PE was constructed as a center of inquiry of the body and identity for young people. Drawing from a critical view, the *Body Curriculum* aimed to challenge, deconstruct, and destabilize stereotypical constructions of the body, and to create a safe socioeducational space for young people to construct new meanings about the body.

The current study thus, contributes to the growing research on body issues and curriculum development (Enright & O’Sullivan, 2012b; Fisette, 2011; Oliver & Lalik, 2004) by adding knowledge on body work in school physical education (PE). The specific purpose of this participatory visual research was to incorporate a *Body Curriculum* into a fitness unit in a secondary school and to conduct research on the extent to which this curriculum enhanced students’ embodied learning. The aim of the *Body Curriculum* was to assist young people in becoming active and critical learners in reading, representing, and evaluating the cultural (mis)representations of the bodies they mediate, embody, and perform in their daily lives. The specific research questions were as follow: (a) to what extent did the *Body Curriculum* enhance participants’ self and social critical awareness of dominant media representations of the body? and (b) How did participants respond to the integration of a *Body Curriculum* into a fitness class?

Visual Participatory Methodology

To address the purpose of this study, the researchers conducted qualitative participatory research using visual methodologies. Participatory visual research is concerned with young people's production of their own visual material as part of the research process (Gauntlett & Holzwarth, 2006). Participatory methods work with young people to recognize their agency and the ways they can contribute to the research process thoughtfully, critically, and creatively (Veale, 2005). Participatory methods aim to empower young people to reflect upon their life conditions or experiences, and to give them tools to deal with social justice issues (Prosser & Burke, 2008). While "activist" research, with its roots in Freirean pedagogy, aims to "liberate" participants from oppression (Ellsworth, 1992), participatory research, conducted with young people and informed by third wave feminist perspectives, aims to mobilize young people's agency (Blaise, 2005), enabling them to voice, express, and represent their experiences and their own words in meaningful and contextualized ways (Gauntlett & Holzwarth, 2006). For instance, Ellsworth's (1992) work, "Why doesn't this feel empowering!" reconceptualizes power, not as oppressive, but as fluid, penetrating, multiplicitous, and conflictual. While "activist" research aims to raise critical awareness about oppressive "absolute truths" (Ellsworth, 1992), researchers conducting participatory research are concerned with how young people construct their own realities, and how their realities impact their embodied identities (Blaise, 2005). Another important aim is the transformative aspect of the participatory research process: Participants' engagement in this process allows and enables them "to define their own reality and challenge imposed knowledge" (Veale, 2005, p. 254).

Because words often can be disempowering for young people (Prosser & Burke, 2008), the integration of the visual as both a pedagogy and a research method (i.e., taking pictures, finding images) provides young people with innovative tools and alternative means of expression and empowerment. Thus, this participatory visual study sought to engage with students in a secondary school to reflect on the media's impact on their embodiment in a fitness-driven physical culture and to give them opportunities to express their own subjective views of the body. The visuals used in this study (i.e., media texts and photography), then, served as a means to engage participants in an active process of producing and expressing subjective representations of their critiques, understandings, and stories. Although researchers' selection of body images and use of photo elicitation to probe participants' talk about their embodiment has yielded helpful findings, researchers have made a case for the usefulness and benefits of visual participatory research with young people (Clark-Ibanez, 2004). Researchers in this study worked *with* rather than *on* young people, using counter-hegemonic practices to raise social awareness and empower participants (Prosser & Burke, 2008).

According to Gauntlett and Holzwarth (2006), the images that young people create can reveal more subjective and authentic dimensions of their experiences in society.

School Context, Participants, and the Body Curriculum

The research setting was a private high school located in a large urban metropolitan area in the Northeast region of the United States. The study took place during a fitness class as regularly implemented over a spring semester. The school was located in an affluent urban area, and the student population was predominantly white and upper middle class. The school promoted its reputation as being progressive and student-centered (because of its small student population and high teacher-to-student ratio), as well as "arts focused." The school's philosophy is rooted in constructivism, a perspective that aims to promote students' learning as an active process in small class size, encouraging students to engage in inquiry and exploration to build upon prior knowledge with new knowledge in meaningful ways. The PE secondary program was delivered in a 60-minute class period. A 10th grade class was selected for this study ($n = 11$). The participants were 11 high-school students, ages 15 and 16 (i.e., 4 white females, 6 white males, 1 black male). All 11 students were invited to participate in this study, and all agreed to participate. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the school, and informed consent was obtained from the students and their parents. All participants' names used in this manuscript are pseudonyms.

Creating and Implementing a Body Curriculum

Before this participatory research, the researcher, with the assistance of the two RAs, developed a *Body Curriculum* creating 10 fitness-based lesson plans that were informed by a sociocultural and critical view. The *Body Curriculum* had three specific aims. First, it was intended to create learning opportunities for young people to more fully engage with physical culture(s) meaningful to them, by encouraging them to explore relationships among the self, the body, and society. Second, the *Body Curriculum* was theory-based and organized around three thematic concepts: (a) the cultural body, (b) the role of gender/sexuality/ability/race on embodied learning; and (c) the role of media as powerful pedagogical sites of young people's identities. Finally, as a student-centered curriculum, the *Body Curriculum* aimed to create pedagogical spaces in PE through which students are viewed as active, social, reflective, and critical learners in physical culture.

Because of unplanned occurrences (e.g., scheduling changes), as well as school-related events that affected student attendance (e.g., parent-teacher conferences, school trips, exam leave), the researchers were able to integrate a total of seven units of instruction into the fitness unit. The aim of each lesson was to give students an

opportunity to engage in “body talk” (Evans et al., 2008) that encouraged them to critically think of, discuss, and problematize the effects of contemporary media body culture as circulated by tv, internet, and magazines, etc. The lesson plans included the presentation of visual images, and such multimedia as video and online content, and they incorporated the use of a personal, digital journal, which afforded students their own space to explore feelings, views, understandings of media narratives, and subjective experiences of who they are in relation to media representations in a fitness-driven physical culture. Examples of lesson plans implemented in the fitness unit included: (a) “*The Strong Body: Not Just a Boy Thing*,” (b) “*Flexibility: Not Just a Girl Thing*,” (c) “*Fitness and Fatness*,” and (d) “*Fit or Fat Phobia?*” In general, the aim of the lesson plans was to create pedagogical spaces for students to become aware of and challenge media stereotypes about the body.

Data Collection and Analysis

All participants were aware of the purpose of this participatory study, which was to explore the ways they read, viewed, and made sense of media body images and their responses to the implementation of the fitness curriculum. Data were collected from several data sources: participants’ visual diaries and written reflections on body issues, multiple formal interviews using photo elicitation, and extensive field notes. The observational period lasted for about 10 weeks over a spring semester. The two RAs positioned themselves as “insiders” of this qualitative participatory inquiry, team-teaching the *Body Curriculum* in the regular fitness unit, while the researcher took an “outsider” position (Reinharz, 1992). One of the RAs was very familiar with the school context, as she had been one of the PE teachers for the past 6 years at the elementary level. Descriptive field notes were recorded during each class. The researcher and the RAs collected field notes and met regularly to reflect upon their notes and perspectives on the students’ responses to the implementation of the *Body Curriculum*; students’ and teachers’ conversations about body issues during each lesson; and the teaching-learning process occurred over the course of the entire fitness unit. Before the implementation of the *Body Curriculum*, the researcher and the RAs met weekly over the fall semester to create 10 fitness-based lessons that integrated a critical and sociocultural view on the body and fitness. In addition, four lessons were piloted in one of the RA’s 10th grade PE classes. This latter PE class, however, was not the research setting used for the implementation of the *Body Curriculum* in the following spring semester. In the spring semester, the researcher and the RAs used another 10th grade PE class for the *Body Curriculum* research conducted throughout the fitness unit. Over the implementation of the *Body Curriculum*, the researcher and RAs continued to meet regularly on a weekly basis to revisit and discuss each lesson plan, as well as to discuss pedagogical approaches to promote students’ “body work” (e.g., scaffolding; set

induction; sociocultural objectives; critical questions; use and selection of videos; photos; students’ assignments; fitness group and individual practices; closure).

For each lesson, a number of constructivist and critical pedagogies were integrated into the regular fitness unit. First, a range of visual texts (e.g., body images, video) were used to initiate, scaffold, and promote girls’ and boys’ critical conversation about the body. Second, because each lesson was designed to promote students’ critical thinking about the body outside of the PE class, critical conversation was promoted in class during the introduction and closure of each lesson, and connected to students’ critical reflection outside. Students were asked to keep electronic, visual-based personal journals throughout the implementation of *Body Curriculum* in the fitness unit.

In particular, the electronic journal was used as a pedagogical tool for students to complete assignments which centered on body issues at home. The researchers assigned students specific tasks related to the focus of the critical conversations about the body engendered in each weekly class. Examples of assignments included: (a) creating a “Who Am I?” visual personal diary; (b) taking and/or finding photos that represented students’ own experiences and world in physical culture; (c) finding images on fitness in the Internet and critically reading these images; (d) finding, selecting, analyzing, exploring, and making sense of images of the ideal body in the world of fitness; (e) finding or producing images that expressed their own views of their body. Students’ electronic diaries were presented as a form of intimate, personal journal to record, reflect upon, and express their views, ideas, and body knowledge. Researchers collected students’ electronic journals at the completion of the unit, before formal interviews with the participants.

At the completion of the fitness unit, two 40–60 minute formal interviews were conducted with each participant. The first formal interview used a semistructured approach (Creswell, 2013). For this first round of interviews, students’ electronic journals were used as a means to generate questions as well as to probe and photo-elicitate their views, understanding of, and responses to, the *Body Curriculum*. Questions generated from the researchers’ careful reading of each student log were organized in three major themes: (a) participants’ views of themselves and their bodies; (b) participants’ responses to critical media pedagogies, as implemented in the fitness unit (i.e., class discussions, journals); and (c) participants’ views, opinions, and sensemaking about the images they produced and included in their journals. During the second interviews, a member check was conducted with each student to summarize and clarify their views, and/or respond to contradictions and/or inconsistencies (van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2008). The second formal interview used a conversational approach (Creswell, 2013). During this second interview, students’ electronic journals and transcripts were accompanied by the researcher’s notes, and questions recorded in the margins of each data source were shared with the participants. The researcher shared

comments and possible readings of the data with each participant, which let the participant respond, react, and take direction of the interview, thereby creating maximum flexibility and establishing more in-depth communication between the participant and interviewer. All interviews were transcribed verbatim.

The researcher conducted an inductive and deductive analysis of students' discourses articulated through class discussions, formal interviews, written reflections, and visual images (Rose, 2007) that centered on the extent to which the *Body Curriculum* enhanced their critical embodied learning, as well as their responses to the *Body Curriculum*. The discourse analysis conducted on the data collected was informed by a poststructural feminist theoretical framework and guided by the research questions following a number of steps. First, the organization and analysis of the data collected were visually-driven rather than words-driven (Prosser & Burke, 2008). This meant that students' electronic visual diaries were used as the primary source of data collection, rather than the formal interviews and written forms of collected data.

Second, the researchers used research questions, theory, and review of literature to look for patterns in the visual data, aiming to capture the meanings students constructed about the body, gender, and fitness, their responses to the *Body Curriculum*, as well as meaning-making of the media images they collected. The researchers then took notes in the margins of the visual texts included in the visual diary and conducted a primary content analysis of the images (van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2008). A content analysis is useful to code explicit possible relationships between people, places, and things represented in a visual image. Drawing from van Leeuwen and Jewitt's (2008) approach to visual-driven content analysis, the researcher generated the following questions to code the images included in the electronic visual diary: Who is in the image? How are the people represented in terms of body size, shape, and muscularity? What clothing do the people wear? What physical activity practices are people engaged in? What is/are the gender/s of the people in the image? What is/are the race/s of the people in the image? What is the context? Are people represented engaged in action or posing? What bodily poses or actions (behavior) are represented? What are the fitness practices or equipment used?). Students' production of visual texts, in this case, is seen as a social practice in itself. Fourth, at the completion of the first round of visually-driven content analysis, the researchers conducted a discourse analysis of the images included in the log using students' verbal (i.e., formal interviews) and written meaning-making of the photos (i.e., students' written notes on their visual diary) to capture regularities of meaning as well as the repertoire of students' meaning-making. The researchers used a discourse analysis (e.g., Rose, 2007, Chapter 8) as a process to identify, describe, capture, and code how the participants "saw," talked, and wrote about images they produced in the context of participants' own worlds of physical culture as represented in their personal visual

diary. The researchers were particularly interested in the students' meaning-making of the visual texts included in the log, students' expression of their embodied identity, and their responses to the *Body Curriculum*. As a result of the data analysis on participants' discourses about the body and the *Body Curriculum*, three themes emerged: (a) "Stop Photoshopping!": Body Work, Gender, and Media Stereotypes; (b) "Fitting" Social Norms: "I Mean I Am Pretty Fit, Pretty Muscular, Thin..."; and (c) Critical Media Pedagogy: Moving Beyond Normative Ideals of the Body?

Results

The *Body Curriculum* integrated in the fitness unit opened up pedagogical socioeducational spaces for students to deal with the impossibility of "fitting" into the world of fitness and health that the media create. Through class discussions and personal journals, students reflected upon how the media, as powerful sites of pedagogy, deliver body ideals regarding issues of gender/sex, body size, shape, and muscularity. As active agents, participants named and sometimes even challenged both gender stereotypes produced by the "perfect body" and the "unhealthy" body ideals that the media circulate. Although participants resisted visual imperatives of body size, shape, and muscularity that the media dictate, they also recognized how difficult it is for young people not to be "caught up" in this media storytelling (especially for girls). In spite of their awareness and critical stance, students participated in the media-driven culture of performativity (Evans et al., 2008), comparing themselves to idealized fit and healthy bodies and using the discrepancy between media images of ideal bodies and "real bodies" as a means to "normalize" their own body size and shape. Their views of the body were not malleable, however, but rooted in narrow, fixed, heteronormative, white ideals of "looking a certain way" to "fit" societal norms of physical appearance and attractiveness.

"Stop Photoshopping!": Body Work, Gender/Sex, and Media Stereotypes

Participants recognized the media as playing a powerful role in dictating cultural standards and ideals of body size, shape, muscularity, and appearance of fit bodies. The implementation of the *Body Curriculum* created an opportunity for a large amount of students' "body talk." In particular, class discussions and personal journals opened up pedagogical spaces for young people to recognize and blame the media for producing unachievable representations of unrealistic female and male bodies. Eric, for example, elaborated on the discrepancy between media representations of the strong body and his view of his own body as follows:

Well, the journal, one of the questions was to find, include picture of a strong body. . . . I Googled "strong man" and "strong woman," and these were

two of the first images (Figure 1) that came up. And I think this is an accurate representation of what most people would consider a strong man and a strong woman. . . . Well, for women, I can't speak from experience, but I would say that the media encourages them to be skinny and maintain a certain body type where they have to be really small and have a flat stomach. . . . *I picked them [images] because I figured this is what or what I think society deems a strong man and a strong woman are. This isn't really an accurate representation.* But I don't feel like any picture would be an accurate representation because everyone can look different, so you can't really put one picture and say this is what you are supposed to look like. . . . I'm active and I'm pretty strong, I guess, but I don't resemble these pictures. . . .

Interviewer:

There is a statement in your journal here I would like for you to elaborate on a bit more. "I would like to gain a bit more muscle but I would never seek to look like the man in this picture."

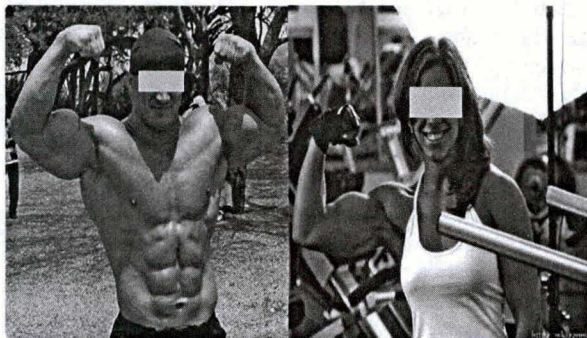


Figure 1 — Eric's 'Strong Body' media images included in his personal diary

Eric explained:

I would never want to be that big. I feel that's almost unhealthy and just, I don't know, I would never want to be that big. But I could see myself, like, I've been recently, toward the end of this wrestling season, I've been starting to work out more and I don't know, I enjoy working out . . . good to stay active. I don't know, *I just want to like, build a little more muscle, nowhere near that big though.*

Media exposure increases the drive for thinness among girls (Harrison & Hefner, 2006) and muscularity among boys (Readdy, Watkins, & Cardinal, 2011). As in Eric's case, the media provide a visual structure in and through which young people filter their body experiences and self-development; this structure works as a pedagogical platform for young people's learning of and examining body values, statuses, and attitudes (Gauntlett & Holzwarth, 2006). Male muscularity appeared as a site of contradiction for Eric. On the one hand, he defined large muscularity as emblematic of a "strong man," yet it was simultaneously representative of "unhealthy" behavior. On the other hand, in conflicting ways, he viewed his own body as "physically fit," but not big enough, desiring to build "more muscles." However, in line with Eric's views, other participants commented upon the media body images they included in their journals by revealing hidden assumptions underpinning "idealized bodies": They are social fabrications of perfect bodies that are far from reality. For example, Victoria noted:

When it comes to like, I think exercising and looking a certain way (Figure 2), that's definitely like, if you're doing deliberately, it's more of a society influence because you know, males strive to be like, bulkier and women strive to be slimmer.

Interviewer:

You said something interesting in your diary about magazines – they do not control the outcome. . . . And



Figure 2 — Victoria's 'Strong Body' media images included in her personal diary

you said, "*In some way would be easier to accept different bodies if we did not have images of the ideal body.*" Could you please explain this statement?

Victoria responded:

I think the first sentence that talks about idolizing a figure that doesn't exist, it's probably true for a lot of people. When they, like, magazines, they portray a woman at their best, you know. They're beautiful but they're better than that because they're airbrushed and a lot of people have now like, begun to understand that like everything you see is not always real.

Victoria agreed with Eric's view of the media as a site of fabrication of images of idealized bodies. Yet, differently from Eric, Victoria included in her visual diary only images of women representing slender, toned, and athletic bodies posing and in action (Figure 2). It is possible that Victoria's decision was dictated by the pressure she experiences as a young woman "to look in a certain way." However, while the pervasive marketing of images heightens hierarchies of body values and statuses, often embodied by young people, the visual, when employed in critical media pedagogy, can also create sites of resistance and disruption of media narratives. Media texts as critical media body pedagogies assisted and empowered young people to deal with, analyze, and challenge media stereotypes, enabling them to challenge media representation of idealized bodies. Another student Leo, provided a strong rationale for why it is important to recognize the ways media-fabricated bodies are impossible to achieve. In his journal, Leo acknowledged "society likes when people with bulging muscles pose, but he also stated: "Wanting a body that cannot be gained is never a good idea." Leo then resisted media narratives of strong bodies by excluding conventional media images from his journal and instead included cartoon caricatures of strong bodies—Red Hulk and Red She-Hulk (Figure 3). When the interviewer asked Leo to explain his statements, Leo conveyed:



Figure 3 — Leo's representations of 'Strong Bodies'- Red Hulk and Red She-Hulk

I think that's a major problem. No one I know, I can say, is like that, is I guess, well, I don't know anyone I know feels that the way about themselves that they're always trying to have like a perfect body but I know it exists, it definitely exists and *it's a big problem.*

Interviewer:

For girls or for boys? For both of them?

Leo:

In my experience, mostly girls. . . . But I think there's not much pressure on them [boys], from themselves or from society, to do such a thing unless they're body builders. Yeah, unless they're body builders. . . . I think something that can be done to, to lessen the effect of that is *to stop photoshoping* the pictures because it's, that's very deteriorating, and nothing good can come from that besides like, money for the company. Photoshopping the pictures, the idea it's like making a picture of a body that nobody can have and then putting it up and saying, try to be like this. . . . I'm not sure if this is true, but I imagine in some countries with like *dictators* they're like, this is the perfect man, try and be like him. And so like, I just feel like it's sort of like that.

As Leo claimed, contemporary media performative culture, such as the "cult of slenderness" (Tinning, 1985) or a muscular body, might have deleterious effects on young people if not problematized in school (Cliff & Wright, 2010). Regarding the gender difference in relation to the media pressure on young people, not all the boys agreed with Leo. While Leo suggested that photoshopped images of beauty, health, and fitness put significantly more stress on girls than boys, Trevor for instance, did not concur. For Trevor, the media have a powerful influence on boys as well. The following exchange between the interviewer and Trevor demonstrates his perspective.

Interviewer:

You brought up [during class discussion] that a lot of guys struggle with body image and their bodies and that it's not just a female thing.

Trevor:

Well I mean girls, their main goals just to be skinny and to be like good looking as skinny. Then guys if you are too skinny that's not good and if you are too fat it's not good, so I feel like guys objective should be just to get muscle and stuff. Well one of my friends who was wrestling in 8th grade was like 150 lbs. and he wasn't a lot of muscle, and he would be crying after every practice being like why are all you guys like strong and stuff and I am like this? . . . But definitely guys have a lot concerns about their bodies image more than you think. . . . Yeah. *I'm a guy, I definitely feel the pressure to be strong and stuff as a wrestler.*

Because young people are bombarded by pervasive images of “ideal” fit bodies as circulated by the internet, tv, sport, fitness, health magazines etc., the pressure around body issues is significant and very difficult to negotiate for both girls and boys (Drummond, 2003; Fisette, 2011; Oliver & Lalik, 2004). As Wykes and Gunter (2010, p. 52) stated, “The problem seems to be that so many of the images offered to women [and men] in the media are the same.” Most participants in this study, such as Eric, Victoria, Samantha, and Trevor echoed this statement, while some students, such as Leo, aimed to send a sharp and clear message to the media: “stop photoshopping”! In general, students rejected the stereotypical images of the ideal body as portrayed by the media, constructing these stereotypes as “unhealthy” because they are impossible to achieve. Participants, however, recognized male muscularity and female slenderness as important body gendered markers of physical attractiveness. According to Larsson, Redelius, and Fagrell (2011), heronormative discourses of the body inform the ways young girls and boys feel and view the “normal” body. Slenderness and muscularity are constructed as oppositional gendered norms and represent, respectively, physical features of heteronormative femininity and masculinity within mainstream physical culture. Eric, Victoria, Leo, and Trevor took different positions with regard to the role of gender/sex on young people’s pressure to obtain normative body size, muscularity, and shape. While some students pointed out how gender roles and the emphasis on looks and grooming in the media are overwhelmingly a problem for young women, other participants recognized boys’ growing dissatisfaction with and/or concerns about their body and muscularity. However, as Drummond (2003, p. 132) suggested “with increasing number of males exhibiting similar issues, such [body] concerns are not longer exclusively a female phenomenon.”

While young people, in different ways, were critical of the role of media representation of idealized feminine and masculine bodies, they were unaware of the ways race informs media body narratives. The under-representation of nonwhite ideal fit bodies tells viewers that white bodies matter (Wykes & Gunter, 2010). By excluding nonwhite bodies from media representations, the implicit media message is that nonwhite bodies are not symbolic of fit and healthy bodies in American society. The images students included in their personal narratives to talk about idealized body were overwhelmingly white. Among all the images participants produced and used for their personal diaries, only two black bodies were included by one participant (Samantha), and both of these images aimed to illustrate “fat bodies”; and one image of a female athletic body included by Victoria (Figure 2). Participating in whiteness and taking up a color-blind position, race remained absent from participants’ “body talk.” Frankenberg (1993) noted: “Naming whiteness displaces it from unmarked, unnamed status that is itself an effect of its dominance. Among the effects on white people both of race privilege and of the dominance of whiteness are their seeming normativity, their structured invisibility” (p.

6). Participants’ comments were, in general, colorblind, centering on the media’s influence on young people’s body images by disavowing the role of race. The lack of problematization of specific normative ways as central norms, standards, and procedures as universal and racially unmarked leaves the normative power of whiteness intact (Puwar, 2004). Like other participants, while Samantha referred to the stereotypical image of a fit body as a white body in her critical analysis, whiteness is neither destabilized nor revealed. Samantha stated:

I thought that they both depicted strong bodies (Figure 4). They were posing for a photo shoot, so it was like the stereotypical media image of a fit body that we all, that influences how we view the word “fitness.” Just social and media, that in our world kind of tries to extract those people that have blond hair and blue eyes. . . . *I think it does affect us.* I mean, some people want to look a certain way or want to be more like this or more like that, but it’s just, it just depends on the individual person, how much it means to them if *they get caught up in it* and try to like strive towards it. But I try not to compare my body with other people’s. I just try to focus on what I need from myself and what’s going to most benefit me. . . . It’s all about personal image and what, how different images in today’s world affect you, I guess. . . . Like I’m not going to diet, I’m not going to start training hard, I’m not going to train for the marathon, but *I’m gonna just try to do small things that can affect my overall image and body like walking a few extra blocks to the bus instead of taking the subway.*

While participants were critical of the media, their own body conceptions, concerns, and understandings still seemed to be “caught up in it [the media].” The media’s negative influence on people’s self concept is not a recent issue. More than 30 years ago, Orbach (1978) noticed that “they [media] produce a picture that is far removed

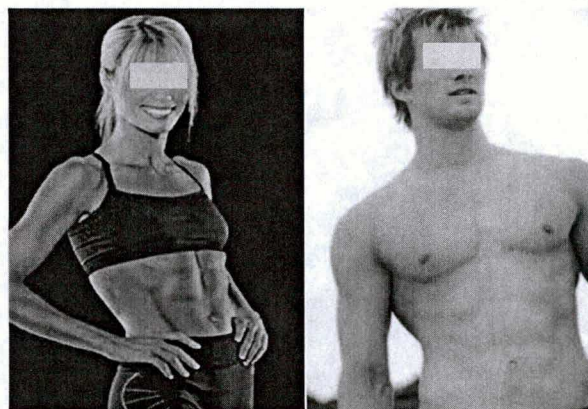


Figure 4 — Samantha’s ‘Strong Body’ media images included in her personal diary

from the reality of everyday lives" (pp. 20–21). In line with Orbach's position, all participants in this study were able to locate the core of body-image issues within the discrepancy between the ideal body as delivered by the media and a perceived "real" body-self. Although body issues are becoming more and more ingrained in our Western culture (Wyke & Gunter, 2010), young people named and confronted stereotypical media images of the body as desirable but unachievable: "inaccurate representations" of real bodies. While students were uncritical of the ways media images of perfect bodies are racialized, they did criticize the media's role in conditioning young women and men to adopt narrow, impossible standards of size, shape, and muscularity. Participants resisted media's stereotypical images of the fit body, however, as a strategy to "normalize" their embodiments.

The Importance of "Fitting" Social Norms: "I Mean I Am Pretty Fit, Pretty Muscular, Thin"

For study participants, investing the self in a range of physical activities and health practices—from walking, exercising, and swimming to making healthy choices—was important to adhere to discourses of "normal" body size and shape and thus to appear "fit" and "healthy." While resisting media narratives of the perfect body, all students used physical activity and health self-management practices to maintain normative ideals of feminine and/or masculine bodies. Health and physical-activity practices represented sites of discipline, control, and regulation of the body to maintain a socially acceptable gender appearance, "normal" bodies with regard to size, shape, and muscularity. Dominant heteronormative discourses of the body as circulated by the media appeared to homogenize young people's embodiment to narrow conceptions of size, shape, and muscularity. As Vasudevan and Hill (2008) suggested, "Media texts provide an important point of entry into the lived experiences of their students" (p. 1). Students' body perceptions were positive, and their investment in physical activity and health appeared to be intrinsically related to issues of body appearance and attractiveness to strictly "fit" societal norms. For instance, Samantha explained:

I've been very careful about what I eat, although sometimes I think little treats are ok. But basically, I work, well I don't work out but sometimes over the summer I'll go to the gym and on the elliptical and I swim almost every day at camp. We do a lot of physical activities, like walking. During the school year, I try to walk as much as I can but I don't do any sports outside of school. . . . *It's just about making healthy life choices for me.* Like, instead of having cookies for a snack or chocolate or whatever, I'll try to have some fruits and vegetables. I eat healthy breakfast. For me, *it's all about eating healthy* and then also incorporating some physical activity. . . . All my life I've been a *really healthy eater*. . . . I just went to the

doctor the other day. . . . I'm almost under. This time I was like 40%, so I was technically underweight. I'm conscious of it but I don't try to be underweight, I just, all my life I've been a really good eater.

Under the public scrutiny produced by the obesity epidemic and media body imagery, thinness is cultivated as a universal value. The consequence of this for many girls, as in Samantha's case, is to become "dangerously thin" (Evans et al., 2008, p. 14). Rather than making careful healthy choices as in Samantha's case, Trevor invests himself in wrestling as a disciplinary mechanism to construct his identity upon the idea of a strong body. Trevor commented:

I'm a wrestler and I've been doing that for about 11 years, so physical activity is very important to me. It keeps in shape. . . . *I think muscles are attractive to people, so I try to get that. It helps with my wrestling 'cause I'm stronger than most kids at my weight.*

Exercising and making healthy choices represent new forms of normalizing practices dictated by such dominant discourses as the obesity epidemic and media displays of healthy and fit bodies. Health and well being are to be performed by taking up appropriate practices to achieve and display the "right" body size, shape, and muscularity. For instance, for Victoria, physical activity is important for cultivating a "nice" body. Victoria pointed out:

I think it [physical activity] plays a really big part in my life, whether it be like, at school or outside of school because I do sports 2 trimesters out of 3 in school.

Interviewer:

How would you describe your body?

Victoria:

It's nice, I think. I think it's pretty healthy, generally speaking. Pretty fit, I think it should be a little more fit, working toward that though. I think more muscular in certain areas, not so flexible anymore, toned in other areas.

In general, students' perceptions of their bodies were affirmative, as they defined themselves as taking responsibility for exercising regularly, being conscious of their body, and making healthy choices to conform to social norms. Learning self-management skills, self-discipline, self-regulation, self-motivation, and having a positive body-perception, alongside with taking up discourses of healthism, are all definitions of "self-made" individuals within neo-liberal discourses of the body, the new generation of successful citizens who can face the challenges of new global economies (Macdonald, 2011). While Samantha, Trevor, and Victoria used a range of self-management physical activity and/or health practices, yet they all endorsed discourses of healthism, molding themselves to mirror the model

for the neo-liberal subject—"entrepreneurs of the self" (Francis & Skelton, 2008)—to maintain masculine and feminine physical traits (e.g., looking fit and healthy) and adopt values (e.g., working hard, taking responsibility, diligence, self-regulation, self-confidence, caring for the body) central to being and becoming global citizens who can successfully overcome the challenges of the new global economies. Imitating media representations of boys' bodies, Matthew, took photos (Figure 5) of his own muscularity, reflecting upon his view of his body and the importance of exercise. Matthew explained:

I mean, every day pretty much I have to have physical activity when I go home and try to do homework. I usually can't concentrate unless I've gotten a couple of hours in. And so like the sports after school and everything help me focus and basically structure my day because without that it's hard to focus on anything else. . . . *I mean I am pretty fit, pretty muscular, thin, yeah.* I mean, it said if you think of yourself as strong now, whatever, you can just take a picture so that's what I did, even though I'm not in shape 'cause I'm not cross-county training now 'cause the season is over during the spring, but *you know I still think that my body is pretty strong* (Figure 5). I mean I guess I just look more defined in that one (Figure 5).

Although Matthew, Samantha, Trevor, Victoria, and other students recognized the ways power operates through the media on young women's and young men's bodies, when comparing themselves to media images of idealized bodies, they all recognized the importance of maintaining a certain body image. Matthew, differently from Samantha, Trevor, and Victoria, decided to put her upper body muscularity on display (Figure 5). None of the students in this study viewed their bodies through a negative lens; they all constructed themselves as "normal" bodies: "healthy," "nice," "thin," "stronger than other kids," "pretty strong," and "pretty fit." For both

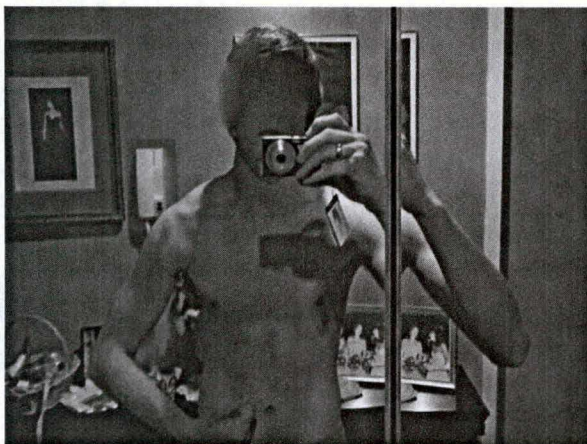


Figure 5 — Matthew's self-portrait of his 'defined' body: '*. . . I am pretty fit, pretty muscular, thin*'

girls and boys, the major concern was to maintain an "in shape" body for appearance and physical attractiveness reasons. While they were critical of unachievable body ideals, when describing their own bodies, they simultaneously reconstructed physical attractiveness by adopting stereotypical notions of feminine and masculine bodies. Gendered norms were central to participants' discourses of normalcy. "Paying attention to their body," "exercise," and "healthy eating" were all disciplinary mechanisms participants adopted in their daily lives by adhering to discourses of healthism and physical-activity promotion that they embodied and performed.

Notably, by resisting media narratives of unattainable bodies, and simultaneously constructing themselves as fit bodies in more "realistic" terms, participants positioned themselves as bodies that "fit" social norms and/or as flawless bodies: "better than other kids'" bodies. In Western society, "normal" bodies are constructed in opposition to "abnormal" bodies—bodies that are "different" and do not fit the notion of "normalcy": "fat," "unfit," "unhealthy," or "lazy" bodies (Puwar, 2004). The normal/abnormal binary implicitly privileges the construction of "normal bodies"—bodies that adhere to a certain size, shape, and muscularity as dictated by society. Bodies that do not conform to normative size and shape are deemed to be, defined, and classified as "Other" bodies: bodies that *look* "unfit," "unhealthy," or "fat" and thus belong to people who fail to take responsibility and to care for their bodies. In this study, by embodying this dichotomy, participants positioned themselves as bodies that manage to self-regulate and self-discipline and thus, are superior to bodies that appear to deviate from normative size and shape.

The self-regulation and discipline of the self to narrow conceptions of body size and shape to "fit" social norms, however, might result in a number of risks for young people. First, young people's embodiment of such a normal/abnormal binary might encourage them to invest in fitness, health, and physical activity practices solely because of issues of physical appearance (Wykes & Gunter, 2010). Second, the embodiment of this dichotomy might result in a lack of acceptance of healthy and fit bodies of a wide range of sizes, shapes, and muscularity. Concerns about deviating from the "normal" size and shape might become a source of pressure for both girls (Oliver & Lalik, 2004) and boys (Drummond, 2003). Subjective dissatisfaction with their bodies or pressure not to deviate from these body norms thus might result in an over preoccupation with issues of size and shape, and thus the adoption of dysfunctional practices, such as over-exercise and/or eating disorders (Evans et al., 2008). Both girls and boys in this study were most concerned about using exercise and dieting practices to avoid becoming "overweight" and thus to maintain a "normal" appearance and/or cultivate attractive bodies.

While participants challenged the media narratives of perfect bodies, their conceptions and views of their own body attributes were not malleable. Their rejection of media ideal bodies was intentionally or unintention-

ally, consciously or unconsciously, used as a strategy to position themselves as "normal" fit bodies; bodies that strictly conformed to and thus did not deviate from fitness social norms. As Wykes and Gunter (2010) suggested, "perceived ideal discrepancies that cause dissatisfaction in relation to aspects of the body that are regarded as malleable, such as weight and the distribution of fat, are believed often to provoke attempts to narrow this discrepancy through such methods as dieting and exercise" (p. 4).

Critical Media Pedagogy: Moving Beyond Normative Ideals of the Body?

Considering students' responses, it was evident that body issues matter a great deal to young people. This curriculum created pedagogical spaces for young people to critically reflect upon, negotiate, challenge, and make sense of what the media persistently and pervasively tell them in their daily lives and offered a socioeducational space for them to express, listen to, and legitimate their different embodiments and perspectives. Although the implementation of critical media body pedagogies promoted "body talk", participants enjoyed and found interesting their embodiment of "normalcy" regarding size and shape at the intersection of gender and race remained unchanged. When the interviewer asked participants to comment on the effectiveness of critical media pedagogies (i.e., class discussions, journals), Samantha, for instance, commented:

I think that they were very informative at least, but also they were very interesting and very humm, I learned a lot from it that I wouldn't have otherwise thought about or questioned. I think that everyone has their own opinion and that opinion can be taken in several different ways and so, it depends. So everyone's definition of a certain thing can be different and their own body image, it's very specific to the situation and how much effort you want to put into changing or modifying it or if you want to at all. . . . I thought it [journal] was very interesting and like it made me have to think about what, how I feel about myself. . . . I really enjoyed the discussion.

While students' responses to the *Body Curriculum* were in general positive, students' opinions and views were not homogeneous. For instance, while Samantha identified the electronic journal as a "very interesting" pedagogical approach, William commented on another critical pedagogy, making the following remarks:

I mean I actually liked it a lot. It was more interesting than, I guess regular strength training class, and I really liked it compared to regular strength training class where you just, you go to class, you have a warm up, you exercise. I think the discussions were helpful. . . . I guess it sort of gave you more of a motive to exercise. . . . Instead of just the teacher talking to you and telling you stuff, there was the opinions of all the other people in the class who

may have had different views on something, and I just think that was a nice addition too.

The two class discussions integrated at the beginning and the end of each lesson consistently throughout the fitness unit included the visual as a means to promote students' critical thinking: posters of images of media "popular" bodies, from fitness and sport to fashion and popular culture. All the images used for the instructional units were printed out in a large size and put up on the gym wall during the entire class period. For instance in "*Fit and Fat Phobia*," a number of images of Oprah finishing a marathon and Valerie Bertinelli running a race contrasted images of two very slim top models, Megan Fox and Blake Lively (Figure 6). This lesson especially resonated with one of the students, Victoria, who pointed out:

I liked the discussions. I thought they were insightful. It was nice to see people talk about certain subjects. . . . I learned uumm, we had this one conversation that uumm it was about like watching Oprah and that other lady cross the line, then compared them to Megan Fox and Blake Lively, I think? And realizing that they're not fit and that they've come out openly and said it [they never exercise], like whereas Oprah and the other lady [Valerie Bertinelli], they represent the fit bodies. I learned that it's even harder to make assumptions like that because you know, it's not right at all.

Interviewer:

How did you like keeping a journal?



Figure 6 — Critical media pedagogy: Images used for '*Fit and Fat Phobia*' lesson

Victoria:

I was sceptical about it, I think, but I thought it was very easy, actually I got down to it. I thought it was nice. . . . I think it's good for people to be educated. I think uum a lot of people, you know, I would've been one of those people who thought, oh, Blake Lively? She must exercise all the time or she must be in the gym every day but like, I think it was really important for me to understand that that's not the case at all. And I think it would be nice for other people to learn that too.

The visual aspect integrated into each lesson raised significant interest among students, because it provided them with a space to be critically involved with media messages they consume in their daily lives and to deal with cultural ideologies produced in society. The visual elements spoke to participants in different ways, however. Matthew, for example, commented on another lesson, "*Flexibility: Not Just a Girl Thing*," which included six images of males and females of different races engaged in yoga practices; this lesson aimed to challenge the gendered social construction of flexibility as a "feminine thing" (Figure 7). Thinking about his own body experience in relation to flexibility, Matthew noted:

I definitely think it's useful and that it's important to have a class like this. . . . I thought that they [class discussion and journals] were very interesting and they sort of furthered the understanding of the importance of fitness and what we were doing in class. Well, I definitely think now I want to work more on flexibility because I've never been flexible at all, and I think it's more important now after the discussion about flexibility. . . . I like the class discussion. You could hear everybody's opinion,

and you could actually discuss it instead of just writing what you thought. The class discussion gets more enriched because you know it's a longer time period, and you can discuss more, and you can also focus on the physical activity and the time for that. I thought it was an interesting way of analyzing your own thought and learning about and thinking more [about] the different concepts of fitness and how they apply to you and how they apply to other people.

Although students in general responded positively to the *Body Curriculum* because they read these images through the lens of their own body experiences, which thus encouraged them to make links and reconsider their own views around fitness notions, a few students pointed out some limitations of the fitness unit. Alex's note is representative of these students' voices. He explained:

Well, there wasn't really, there wouldn't be enough time for both the study [class discussions] and the activities. . . . It's just hard to do both in the hour-period because we have to dress and everything. It's just way too hard to do that.

There was less time available for the curriculum than what the researchers anticipated. Building upon constructivist curriculum models, the researchers designed and intended to teach a total of 10 lessons over 12 weeks. Because of unplanned school events and unexpected changes in the schedule, however, they were able to implement seven 60-minute lessons. Yet, acknowledging Alex's important critique, in general, the *Body Curriculum* raised critical awareness among students around taken-for-granted assumptions of fitness, size, and shape, but it failed to move students beyond their fixed conceptions of size and shape, as their embodiment of "normative" fit bodies remained unaltered.

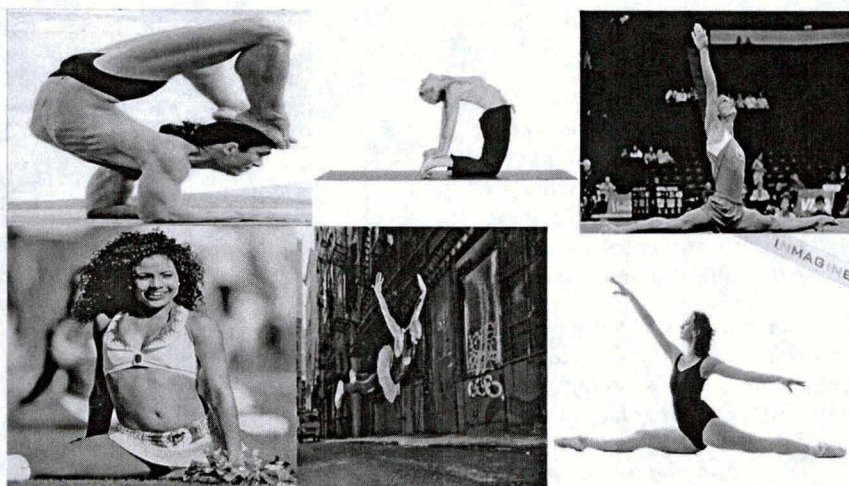


Figure 7 — Critical media pedagogy: Images used for '*Flexibility: Not Just a Girl Thing*' lesson

Conclusions

The body is a site of struggle for young people; as this study demonstrated, girls and boys think a lot about their bodies. Today's schools, however, fail to provide educational spaces that support young people's struggle with their identity; they fail to offer educational spaces where young people can deconstruct, articulate, and challenge messages about the body, health, and physical activity that they consume in their daily lives (Cliff & Wright, 2010; Evans et al., 2008). Problems such as the stigma of obesity among young people, and body issues of size and shape, gender, race, and sexuality, will remain unaddressed unless schools are willing to do body-work. Given that young people live in an increasingly high-tech, global, Western "viewer society," the body-in-culture has become a visual phenomenon very much dictated by the media. Researchers need to examine school PE as an educational source to assist young people critically deal with body issues (Drummond, 2003).

Findings reported in this paper demonstrated how participants rejected media narratives of idealized bodies and embodied more "realistic" ideals about the body, while their desire to look in a certain way was still framed by fixed normative white standards. Individuals are controlled through the invisible power of the norm, and how they discipline their bodies is regulated through a set of values and standards associated with normativity (Butler, 1990). As demonstrated in this paper, the *Body Curriculum*, which integrated visual critical pedagogies into a fitness unit, holds the potential to enhance young people's agency by providing them with tools to critically reflect on body issues and think about their embodiments in relation to fabricated media body narratives. In addition, this participatory visual research has contributed to existing literature on young people's issues of embodiment in physical education in several ways. First, this research aimed to fill a gap in the current literature in PE curriculum studies on body issues. This participatory study adopted a visual approach to create spaces for both girls and boys to critically deal with and reject media stereotypes; and to encourage them "to speak for themselves" about their subjective body experiences in physical activity.

Second, the *Body Curriculum* built upon current constructivist school-based PE curricula by creating student-centered pedagogical spaces. Teaching and learning spaces constructed as sociocultural sites of inquiry of the body shed light on and challenge the media's fabrication of idealized bodies, legitimize and value students' perspectives, and thus facilitate the production of new body knowledge. We suggest that PE teachers integrate a visual component into their curricula to engage young people's critical thinking about body issues. Teachers' adoption of critical media pedagogies can intentionally enable young people to challenge stereotypes and/or misconceptions about the body. Such pedagogies can indeed engage students in telling their own stories, and thereby

help PE teachers understand their doubts, struggles, and uncertainties as well as "see" issues of inequality that impact their senses of self. Finally, the incorporation of "body work" created sites of possibilities for young people to do "identity work" by thinking about an identity they can afford.

While acknowledging the benefits of having implemented the *Body Curriculum*, it is important to point out that the curriculum failed to destabilize students' embodiment of the normal/abnormal body dichotomy. There are a number of limitations to this visual participatory research that need to be recognized. First, drawing from curriculum constructivist models, the length of the fitness unit was considerably short, as it was taught in a total of seven units of instruction. As well, the lessons were too short for the development of substantial embodied learning outcomes regarding normative discourses of the body. Second, while the two class discussions integrated in each lesson promoted "body talk" that raised interest among students, the length of the class period was limited, at times constraining students' time for "working out" in the planned fitness activities. Third, because researchers did not have access to students' journals over the seven lessons, researchers' lack of feedback on students' journals over the course of the fitness unit constrained further questioning and probing of students' "body work." Considering these limitations, it can be suggested that a significantly longer unit (e.g., Sport for Peace) that integrates a sociocultural view with the aim to create critical pedagogical spaces, outside of the PE classes, could further stimulate or invigorate students' "body work" to potentially problematize whiteness at the intersection of size, shape, (dis)ability, and gender, thus potentially destabilizing students' embodiment of normative bodies.

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