

Written evidence submitted by Dr Charlotte Kerner, Lecturer in Physical Education and Youth Sport, Brunel University London (BYC042)

1. Focus of this response

I would like to submit evidence to the select committee in particular reference to the role that education broadly and physical education specifically can play in the promotion of body satisfaction. This submission is informed by my own research that focuses on body image in physical education. This submission focuses primarily on addressing the terms of reference point 8: "What examples are there of schools integrating the promotion of positive body image into school subjects across the curriculum, particularly physical education. How successful have these been? How can success be measured?" Other areas of the terms of reference are addressed only peripherally.

2. Executive Summary

- Given the equal prevalence of body dissatisfaction in boys and girls, a greater emphasis is required in research, policy, practice and programmes that focuses on both boys and girls experiences of body image.
- Body image lessons should be formally integrated into the educational curricular. Lessons should focus on developing socio cultural resistance and self-esteem.
- Given that physical education is the only school based subject in which the body is the focus of all curricular outcomes, further research into the role of physical education in school based body image programs is urgently needed.
- Body image research in physical education should focus on the role of the teacher in developing perceptions of competence and self-esteem in pupils.
- Teacher training and ongoing CPD to support teachers in their delivery of body image based lesson both within the classroom and also within physical education is needed.
- Programmes and support for trainee teachers particularly within the area of physical education to reduce any body image concerns that they might experience is required.

3. Who experiences body image concerns: Prevalence and processes

3.1 Although there tends to be a focus towards exploring how girls experience body dissatisfaction, there is evidence to suggest that levels of body dissatisfaction are

approximately equal in boys and girls. For example, it is suggested that approximately 75-80% of boys and 76-81% of girls aged 13-14 are dissatisfied with their current body size (Kerner, 2013). It is important therefore, to consider the issue of body dissatisfaction to be an issue highly prevalent and highly relevant in both boys and girls. When considering the roles that schools play in addressing body dissatisfaction, it is therefore vital to explore this as an issue relevant to all pupils, regardless of sex.

3.2 It is important to address the differences in the experiences of body dissatisfaction in boys and girls as this may impact curriculum interventions that support the development of body satisfaction. Female body dissatisfaction is predominantly characterised by a desire for a smaller body size (Kerner, 2013). This aligns with the dominant socio-cultural ideal of physical attractiveness for females (i.e. the thin ideal) that is portrayed across different media contexts such as magazines and social media. On the other hand, male body dissatisfaction is characterised by a dual process. A significant proportion of boys who are dissatisfied with their bodies are striving towards a slimmer/smaller physique, however, another significant proportion are striving towards a physique that is larger than their current body size (Kerner, 2013). This striving for increased body size aligns with the dominant socio-cultural messages of an ideal physique in males (i.e. increased muscularity). If these two processes of dissatisfaction in boys are combined (i.e. a desire for a smaller body and a desire for increased muscularity) then body dissatisfaction is of approximately equal prevalence to females. This further justifies the need to explore body image in both males and females, but with an awareness of the differences in social cultural pressures across sexes.

3.3 It is important to note that the fluid and rapidly changing social context in which children and adolescents are situated has the potential to significantly impact both the processes and the prevalence of body dissatisfaction in males and females. For example, there is some evidence to suggest that the dominant view of physical attractiveness in females is evolving from the “thin ideal” towards an “athletic ideal”. This suggests that the socio-cultural standards and pressures placed upon young people are not static. For example, we should particularly be aware of the social media focused context in which children and adolescents are situated. For example, over 50% of 13-17 are using the social media image sharing site Instagram. Furthermore, around 50% of young people ‘like’ health and fitness related social media, with the most popular content being Fitspiration

(Carrotte et al. 2015). There are millions of Instagram posts which include the hashtag Fitspiration or Fitspo and these posts mostly contain selfies of athletic individuals, before and after 'transformation' photos and motivational quotes e.g. 'strong not skinny'. The images have raised concerns due to the impact these may have upon individuals' understanding of their bodies (Varterlaus et al. 2015). The common criticisms are the focus on appearance and praising the athletic body as ideal, which may be deemed unrealistic (Vaterlaus et al. 2015). This is just one example of how the dynamic social context, with the inclusion of social media is influencing the socio-cultural definitions of physical attractiveness and the changing pressure faced by young people.

3.4 In summary, although body image is traditionally seen as a 'female' issue, the evidence would suggest that action be taken to address body image concerns in both boys and girls, whilst considering the different socio-cultural pressures faced between the sexes. Awareness should be made towards the changing nature of the social cultural pressures e.g. how social media content such as Fitspiration can influence body image processes.

4. What role can schools play in promoting body satisfaction?

4.1 Schools play a key role in health promotion strategies for young people, due to resources, staff and the amount of time that young people spend within the school context. The All Party Parliamentary Group on Body Image (2012) called for the mandatory inclusion of body image education into the curriculum and research evidence supports this call for action. Classroom based body image programmes have the potential to improve body image outcomes in children and adolescents, with a recent review of school based programmes concluding that 7 out of 16 programmes positively impacted body image outcomes (Yager et al. 2013).

4.2 The most successful school-based programmes combine a number of strategies within the same intervention (Yager et al. 2013). For example, interventions such as 'Happy Being Me' included both media literacy and peer influence elements (Richardson and Paxton, 2010). The review paper also highlighted the successful approaches used in school-based interventions and reported that 86% of effective programmes incorporated an element of media literacy, 57% of programmes focused on enhancing self-esteem and 43% of programmes incorporated elements around peer influence (Yager et al, 2013). Thus, programmes that focuses on socio-cultural resistance to

dominant messages surrounding the 'ideal' body (through peer influence and media literacy) and programmes that focus on developing aspects of self-worth should be considered for future curriculum integration.

4.3 Moreover, the review by Yager et al. (2013) concluded that successful programmes consisted of multiple, interactive, classroom based activities, therefore, suggesting that programmes in the future should focus on developing multi-session approaches. It is important to note that only 20% of the successful programmes sustained the positive intervention effects after the programme was removed. This suggests that once a programme is removed, the effects are not always sustained. This should be a consideration for future programmes and/or curriculum integration. If effects are not universally sustained after the intervention is removed, a curriculum with ongoing reference to developing socio-cultural resilience and/or self-esteem should be considered. Thus a sustained and integrated approach to body image education may be appropriate.

5. What role can physical education play in tackling body image concerns?

5.1 Overwhelming physical education has been overlooked as a site that can potentially impact body image outcomes. As argued in our recent publication, physical education is the only school based subject in which the body is the focus of all curricular outcomes and thus should not be overlooked when considering how best schools can support children and young people to develop a positive body image (Kerner, Haerens and Kirk, 2017).

5.2 The All Party Parliamentary Group on Body Image (2012) acknowledged that physical education has a role to play in developing positive body image through fostering positive experiences of physical education and encouraging physical activity participation. Positive experiences of physical education can be implemented by teacher behaviours that allow children to feel like they are competent (e.g. feel able to execute physical activity behaviours), autonomous (e.g. feel like they have choice in their physical activity behaviours) and feel a sense of relatedness (feel connected to those around them) (Haerens et al. 2013). Some specific teaching strategies include providing pupils with regular feedback, giving them choice in their activities and providing them with clear guidelines (Haerens et al. 2013). There is a well-established body of literature that links

the development of competence, autonomy and relatedness by teachers in physical education to a range of positive outcomes such as physical activity, enjoyment and effort.

5.3 Evidence suggests that teacher behaviours that support autonomy and competence can impact pupils' general self-esteem (Standage and Gillison, 2007). The impact of physical education teacher behaviours on self-esteem is important given that it was previously outlined how 57% of successful classroom based programmes have focused on enhancing self-esteem. There is some evidence to suggest that teachers with more experience and who use less productive teaching approaches have pupils within their class that experience less body image avoidance behaviours. However, more research is needed to understand how teacher behaviours in physical education can specifically impact body image.

5.4 Limited body image intervention work has been conducted within physical education. Research that has been conducted has focused on activities and strategies that enhance perceptions of physical competence (e.g. make pupils feel that they are able to complete physical activity tasks). An example of an effective programme was a 6-week aerobic dance programme that was delivered to adolescent girls during their physical education lessons (Burgess et al. 2006). This programme sought to impact body image through increasing confidence and perceptions of competence and resulted in significant increases in physical self-perceptions and significant decreases in body image dissatisfaction (Burgess et al. 2006).

5.5 Another intervention was delivered to adolescent girls in Ireland. This 8-week programme included both a classroom component and a physical education component (O'Brien et al. 2008). The physical education component allowed girls to focus on the physical function of the body through dance and relaxation activities. Pupils noted significant increases in the importance placed on competence based attributes and decreases in appearance based attributes (O'Brien et al. 2008). To support this, a positive association has been established between perceptions of competence in physical education and body satisfaction (Kerner, Haerens and Kirk, In Review).

5.6 Physical education has the potential to focus attention on the functional capabilities of the body and divert attention away from the aesthetic focus towards the body that is

evident in the media and wider society. Thus, the role that physical education can play in broader body image programmes needs to be considered further by the development of more physical education based programmes that focus on developing perceptions of competence and self-esteem in both boys and girls.

5.7 It has been outlined how physical education has the potential to positively impact school based body image programmes through teacher behaviours and activities that focus on enhancing aspects of competence, confidence and self-esteem. In addition to this, it should also be considered how some of the current practices in physical education may impact body dissatisfaction. For example, physical education changing rooms, ill-fitting physical education uniforms, co-educational lessons and certain lesson contents such as swimming all have the potential to place increased focus and evaluation of aspects of physical appearance (Kerner, Haerens and Kirk, 2017). Teachers often discourage pupils from engaging in coping strategies that might reduce some of the body dissatisfaction experienced in physical education. Coping strategies may include the use of extra clothing to conceal the body, selecting their own physical education kit or avoidance of physical education altogether. In this regard, in addition to the delivery of physical education, other contextual factors should be considered such as the organisation of changing rooms to reduce body exposure.

5.8 When considering the role of physical education in body image promotion, the role and influence of the teacher must be considered. Importantly, research with trainee teachers highlighted how physical education teachers have greater concerns about their bodies and engage in more maladaptive eating and exercise behaviours than their non-physical education counterparts (Yager and O’Dea, 2009). This is significant, given the nature of the subject at the potential to inadvertently influence the outcomes of pupils through socialisation processes. Thus, the integration of body image programmes in trainee physical education degrees appears justified in order to support this at risk group.

5.9 To summarise, the research evidence to support physical education as a body image promotion site is limited, yet, given the body focused nature of the subject it has significant potential for future inclusion. There is some preliminary evidence to suggest the promotion of perceptions of physical competence can be a mechanism through which to impact body satisfaction in physical education. In order to assess the impact

and success of future programmes in physical education well design and theoretically informed interventions are needed.

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