



A Summary of Robertson and Thomson's (2012) article *"BE"ing a Certain Way: Seeking Body Image in Canadian Health and Physical Education Curriculum Policies*.

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Recent research on how children and adolescents feel about their bodies, how they perceive media messages and the negative impact they have on young minds and bodies has highlighted areas for significant concern and change. Teaching kids to change the way they look at themselves and others, and recognize when their decisions are being influenced by outside forces has become a health priority. Until recently, there had been little research on the body image messages children and adolescents are taught in Canadian schools. *"BE"ing a Certain Way* presents a first look at the presence of body image in Canadian curriculum policies and it emphasizes the importance of effectively teaching this subject in our schools. Researchers Robertson and Thomson from UOIT outline the need for a more complex view of health in Canada's health and physical education curricula (HPE).

Body image is the way we think and feel about our bodies. It is affected by many different outside influences and these may or may not in turn be helpful in our pursuit of overall health and well-being. Robertson and Thomson present recent studies on the social and developmental characteristics of children and adolescents that have brought to light the importance of getting key body image messages to them from a young age.

CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS ARE INCREASINGLY MORE AWARE OF THEIR BODY IMAGE AND, WHEN CONFRONTED BY IMAGES OF THE 'PERFECT BODY', ARE TAKING MEASURES TO NEGATIVELY CHANGE THEIR EATING AND EXERCISE HABITS TO CONFORM.



The authors also stress that both boys and girls experience body-based dissatisfaction and, while both feel pressure to be thin, boys are also pressured to look muscular or 'masculine'. The media lead us to believe that people with thin and muscular bodies are happier, more successful, youthful and socially accepted.

Robertson and Thomson state that it is of great importance that we educate children and adolescents to understand that people come in all shapes and sizes. They can learn to resist social pressures and bullying and to adopt a realistic image of what it means to be healthy.



To carry out their study, Robertson and Thompson developed a framework to analyse current Canadian HPE curriculum policies. Each province and territory was examined for the presence of and the way each addressed body image.

First, we need to define what it means to be healthy and how that fits with our body image. A simplistic view of health is one that focuses on lifestyle choices and taking personal responsibility for one's shape and size. A complex view of health will include factors such as environment, heredity and access to services. This view teaches children and adolescents that people come in a variety of healthy shapes and sizes. After a review of the literature on body image, this simplistic/complex approach to health education was expanded to analyse HPE curricula from all Canadian provinces and territories. Each region was examined for the level of complexity of health, body image, and weight messages as well as the region's overall critical stance.

For example, a curriculum that embraces complex health messages would teach that:

- a) health includes physical, social and emotional health
- b) weight and body image issues impact individuals of all ages and genders, and this may take a serious toll on their self-esteem
- c) social pressure to be a certain size can be resisted through deconstruction, awareness and empowerment



Using their framework, Robertson and Thomson sought these messages in the Canadian curriculum policies.

FINDINGS

The level of complexity of body image messages varied in the curricula from across Canada:

- ❑ most provinces based health on individual choices and personal responsibility
- ❑ Alberta and PEI provided more complex views of health across all grades, including body-positive messages and a view of food as having other roles than solely as a source of calories.

- ❑ British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Ontario and Quebec showed both simplified and complex views, but were inconsistent in teaching body image across all grades
- ❑ The remaining regions' health messages were generally lacking in complexity and displayed little or no evidence of awareness of body image issues
- ❑ Robertson and Thomson not only found little coherence between provinces and territories, but within them as well.

Many studies have shown the importance of teaching body image from an early age to help children build resistance to the pressures to be a certain size and shape. From this study, the researchers found there was little focus in any curriculum on teaching resilience to help students counter both media and societal pressures to conform to a certain idealized image. Robertson and Thomson noted another significant gap in the curricula; that there was little attention, if any devoted to addressing body image concerns in boys.

WHILE THERE WAS SOME ACKNOWLEDGEMENT THAT BODY IMAGE ISSUES NEED TO BE ADDRESSED IN HPE CURRICULA, THERE WERE STILL GAPS IN EVEN THE MOST COMPLEX OF POLICIES.

Based on their findings, Robertson and Thomson conclude that there is a time gap between body image research and curriculum policy development. One example is in the teaching of eating disorders, which recent health research advises against but some provinces still include in their curriculum policies. In addition, some provinces still advocate monitoring BMI, food journals, and fitness testing, which can contribute to over-regulation.

CANADIAN CURRICULUM POLICIES SIMPLY AREN'T UP-TO-DATE WITH CURRENT RESEARCH.

Moving toward a health curricula that adopts a body-positive stance will take time. There is need for a national voice in support of body-positive curriculum - a need that can arguably be considered overdue. Leadership, knowledge mobilizationⁱ, and dialogue are needed to align HPE curriculum policies toward a vision of health and body image that is realistic in complexity while supporting the overall health

of children and adolescents. It is the hope of the authors of *"BE"ing a Certain Way* that their policy analysis will raise awareness in this respect and bring to light the significant importance of body image issues.

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ⁱ Levin, B. (2008). Thinking about knowledge mobilization. Paper presented at the *An Invitational Symposium Sponsored by the Canadian Council on Learning and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada*.