

Body Image Implementation as a Twisty Country Lane: A summary of research.



This is a summary of **Robertson, L., Thomson, D., and Barber, W. (2013)**. From Teacher Concern to Teacher Dissonance: Implementation of a Body Image Program as a Twisty Country Lane. *Journal of Teaching and Learning*, 9 (1) 2013. To quote the article, please refer to the original which may be found @ <http://ojs.uwindsor.ca/ojs/leddy/index.php/JTL/article/view/3597/3008>

A body image program was offered to Ontario schools in response to teacher concern that students were growing more preoccupied with their weight. A teacher's organization gave schools a readymade set of lessons on body image for each grade. Participating teachers and schools were provided with full lesson guides including activities and suggested resources, and attended a professional development day before the program was introduced to the classroom. Given that the whole program was provided you might expect that the program went smoothly. Instead, the researchers found that teaching body image is like a ride on a bumpy twisty lane, full of unexpected twists and turns.

EVIDENCE OF BODY DISSATISFACTION IN YOUNG CHILDREN HAS GROWN.

Being unhappy with their body may influence children's decisions make about exercising, their food intake, or introducing steroids to their bodies to change size and shape. In addition to weight preoccupation, students feel pressured to look a certain way. Because of the barrage of images of an ideal size and shape in the media, it is difficult for students to realize that this ideal is unnatural and can't be achieved by the general population; all bodies aren't formed from the same mould. These media-made ideals also influence how students treat other students, particularly those who are overweight or obese.



Breaking down these messages is essential and is an important task for Canadian education policies. Yet in their research, Robertson, Thomson and Barber find that many provincial policies are not in line with up-to-date body image research.

HEALTH DOES NOT EQUAL WEIGHT.

Some provincial medical associations take on a very limited view of which factors affect a person's weight. They assert that an individual's weight indicates their health status and that the causes of obesity can be fully explained in

simplistic terms (such as overeating and inactivity). By trying to tackle the 'obesity epidemic', they present a view that is in line with the mass media, and not the stance of the Canadian Ministers of Health who recognize that health is determined by multiple factors.



WITH SUCH VARIED AND OFTEN CONTRADICTORY INFORMATION, IT CAN BE INCREDIBLY DIFFICULT FOR PARENTS, TEACHERS AND CHILDREN TO NAVIGATE THE MAZE OF MESSAGES AROUND WEIGHT AND SIZE.

Recent studies have highlighted a need to teach children and adolescents about natural size diversity, how to resist media supported ideals, and to be accepting of many sizes and shapes. The grade K-8 body image curriculum developed by the teachers' organization was created to help teachers in doing just that.

How teachers used the new program varied greatly. In some schools teachers used as few as one lesson, while others succeeded in teaching it throughout the whole school. Overall teachers said there was a definite need for the program; many teachers were at first not aware that body image impacted young children. They also found areas for improvement and aspects of the curriculum that were unclear or conflicting, which made it difficult to teach the program.

Teachers suggested that the body image program should:

- Provide more gender-balanced lessons to ensure the focus is equally split between girls and boys.
- Acknowledge and explain the instances where some messages presented in the body image curriculum don't match the present curriculum.
- Provide more information about how teachers could integrate the body image curriculum with provincial requirements.
- Start body image at the beginning of the school year.
- Refer teachers to lesson resources that are easily attainable and accessible online.
- Find ways to bridge the gap between messages of body acceptance and those of body improvement for schools actively promoting fitness.

Within the body image curriculum, concepts that were more general, like acceptance of difference, were seen as more straightforward to teach. Concepts that challenged or deconstructed mainstream cultural messages were more problematic.

The level of comfort teachers felt with the material was a significant roadblock for some.

1. Teachers were more comfortable talking about body image in primary grades
2. Teachers of grades 4-6 found mixed messages about healthy eating
3. Teachers wondered how big a role heredity plays in body size

HOW TEACHERS' VIEW THEIR OWN BODIES IMPACTED THEIR COMFORT WITH THE BODY IMAGE CURRICULUM.

Teachers that exercised regularly were the most uncomfortable with the message of acceptance at every size. A number of teachers said the reason they decided to teach the program was for personal reasons; they had experienced body-based prejudice and discrimination or knew someone who had been affected by it.

Many teachers expressed that on-going support from peers and mentors during the program would have been beneficial in addressing issues or questions that came up during lessons. This suggestion shows that the approach taken while developing the body image program may not have been the best one.



The body image program was developed with what is called a fidelity approach to implementationⁱ. This approach assembles all of the resources and information that would be most helpful for teachers and puts that into fully designed lessons. It is meant to be ready for the classroom as soon as the teacher gets it. Based on their findings, Robertson, Thomson and Barber recommend that a different approach might better suit the program. A style that is more able to change and grow while body image lessons are being explored in the classroom may better suit the needs of teachers.

The researchers also suggest that, for a body image program to succeed, it is important for teachers to be comfortable with the messages discussed in the lessons. Additional professional development programs and an updated provincial curriculum that matches current

body-positive research would also help make the program more successful.

While it is clear there is a need for body image curricula in schools, this study brought to light many factors that need to be addressed to make a body image program implementation successful. Some of the concerns with the program are easier to adjust, while others that challenge the media's ideal body size are more complex issues that require broader solutions. Given the importance of the issues surrounding body image the researchers emphasize that policy changes need to start happening now.

Summary provided by Kalin Moon (2013).

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ⁱ Altrichter, H. (2005). Curriculum Implementation – limiting and facilitating factors. In Nentwig, P. and Waddington, D. (Eds) *Context based learning of science*. Waxmann: Munster, p. 35-62.