



Giving Permission to be Fat? Examining the Impact of Body- Based Belief Systems – A Summary

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Body image is a critical component for the healthy development of students. A poor body image can result in a withdrawal from some activities and from school altogether. Schools are potential sites for intervention programs that can promote health, self-esteem and size acceptance. Lorayne Robertson and Dianne Thomson studied the implementation of a body image program in six different schools in a province where the curriculum policy does not have a body image component. The authors found, however that the implementation of a program is heavily influenced by teachers' personally-held beliefs and cultural ideals. The combination of these two messages interrupted the message of the body image program.

The article provides a window on the importance of body image for children; a summary detailing some of the issues that arose during the implementation of a body image program and resulted in three levels of implementation (low, medium and high), and suggestions for ways forward to improve the inclusion of body image and self-esteem curriculum programs in schools. The authors analyzed the reactions from of the teachers in the implementing schools using a case study methodology and a planned behaviour analysis framework.

WHY IS BODY IMAGE IMPORTANT?

Body image can be a picture, it can be a feeling, but above all, body image is critically important to boys' and girls' health.



A poor body image has been linked to depression, low self-esteem and eating disorders for children. This includes both girls and boys. Disturbingly, there are also links between suicidal ideation in teens and low body image. As reported by Statistic Canada, 2009, **the second highest cause of death in adolescents is suicide.**

Body based bullying is also a prevalent issue in schools as the bullying risk increases by leaps and bounds for those students who are underweight or overweight, or outside of the generally accepted and mediated 'norm' of appearance. As Robertson and Thomson establish, researchers, educators, and parents are becoming concerned, and they have good reason to be.



Students who are concerned about their body image will choose not to participate in activities that make them happy. Why? They do this in order to decrease their chances of being teased or bullied by others. This has a

ripple effect through their lives, as some will struggle to be active, or even make the time for physical activity, later in life.

SCHOOLS AS INTERVENTION SITES?

As the authors outline, various theorists have identified schools as potential sites for intervention programs. As explained by a study conducted by Haines, Neumark-Sztainer and Theil (2007), teachers generally concur with the idea that poor body image and body based teasing are red button issues for children.



In the same study, teachers also identified concerns surrounding the lack of chances for some children to be active (i.e. those residing in apartment buildings) and the amount of high calorie foods that the students are bringing to school for their lunches. These teachers saw a need for school-based body image interventions, but were aware that support factors needed to be in place for the program to be successful. The body image program that was developed was intended to be used in schools as a way of counteracting media portrayals of youth and encouraging a questioning of body perfection ideals in society.

BODY IMAGE PROGRAM

Six schools were chosen as the sites for the body image program. These schools differed in size, location, and in the success of implementation. Teachers were trained in the use of the body image program materials and packages were distributed to schools for ease of use. This program was voluntary, and the learning outcomes were not directly linked to the provincial curriculum. Following the implementation, the authors conducted interviews with teachers, principals, and librarians in the schools to assess the degree

of success of the body image program. The authors found that there were three levels of implementation for the six schools; low, medium and high and there were two schools in each category.



HIGH IMPLEMENTING SCHOOLS

The high implementing schools demonstrated a whole school focus and had connections between the body image program and current programs in place in the schools such as values education. As well, the teachers used the opportunity to assess their own feelings about personal body image and reflected on how their behaviour was influencing the students, showing a critical approach to the body image issue.

MIDDLE IMPLEMENTING SCHOOLS

The schools that were in the category of middle implementing had enthusiasm at the outset of the program, but then challenges throughout hindered the body image program's success. Some of the challenges centred on the feeling that the program was overly-focused on girls, rather than both boys and girls. Another barrier was a reported inability to acquire additional resources or request help with difficult topics from the authors of the body image program. Another theme was that teachers felt the program should be integrated into the provincial curriculum.

LOW IMPLEMENTING SCHOOLS

Where the two schools were placed in the category of 'low implementing', evidence can be seen in the interviews of personally-held beliefs hindering the implementation. One of

the teachers felt that a body image program that taught about size acceptance was not encouraging students to be the best they could be. Others also felt that the program "appeared to absolve students of personal responsibility for their own fitness, proper eating, and exercise."ⁱ Tensions emerged in the low implementing schools and were not eliminated, resulting in the low implementation success.

SUGGESTIONS FOR WAYS FORWARD

The research conducted by the authors confirms earlier findings that teachers require support in order to move away from long held personal beliefs of body image. Robertson and Thomson suggest first that teacher efficacy should be increased through efforts at knowledge mobilization. A second way forward is an approach of increased critical health literacy which includes critical thinking and problem solving (Anderson & Booth, 2006).



Body image is a critically important topic for the future health of children and it has never been more important to encourage a discussion of these issues. The authors hope that the research conducted and the findings resulting from the implementation of the body image program will provoke thoughtful action from educators and policy makers to effectively address body image in schools.

Summary provided by Kelly Robertson (2013).

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ⁱ Robertson & Thomson, 2013, pg. 11.