



Teaching in Uncharted Waters: A Summary of Research

A summary of: Robertson, L., & Thomson, D. (2012). Teaching in Uncharted Waters: Seeking Critical Body Literacy Scripts. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, Vol. 58, No. 3, 2012, p. 404-424.

Researchers Robertson and Thomson were asked to investigate the success of a provincial body image and self-esteem program one year after its introduction. The program was created to respond to teachers growing concern that their students were increasingly preoccupied with their weight. It was developed by a provincial teachers' organisation and introduced to teachers of grades K-8. Robertson and Thomson were asked to analyse teacher surveys completed after a one-day introductory training session and teacher interviews taken one year later. The findings of Robertson and Thomson's research reveal teacher's perceptions of the program itself, the challenges they encountered and how the teachers felt the student's responded to the content.

Past research has highlighted the increasing pressure on schools and teachers to respond to concerns about the health and weight of their students. The perceived “threat of obesity” has escalated with media attention, giving us an unrealistic impression that our populations are ‘fat’ at epidemic levels. This is further complicated by simplistic views of health that define it solely by diet and exercise. Pressure to monitor shape, size and food intake in response to this “crisis” can potentially do much more harm than good. It has been shown to spread the wrong messages to children: that their size is what matters, and this may lead them to dieting and disordered eating.

INSTEAD OF SIZE DIVERSITY, WE’RE STILL ASKING FOR SIZE ASSIMILATION.

The way we think about health is mostly of two minds, simplistic or complex; the simple view stemming from traditional two-dimensional views of health, the complex coming from newer, more holistic forms of health. Our society still relies on old ways of thinking to solve our modern day issues, which is proving more and more problematic. We need to begin accepting present research and new ways of thinking to respond to health issues. Teachers need better access to research findings and the autonomy to decide when their required curricula haven’t caught up with the research. One related example, the teaching about eating disorders is still present in certain provincial policies. Research has shown that rather than simply enlighten students, teaching about disordered eating and it’s weight loss effects may instead give them ideas about dieting.



The findings of Robertson and Thomson’s study highlight well how traditional views of health, the media and society influence teachers’ ability to teach a body image program and be comfortable.



In interviews, teachers shared that the body image program lessons were helpful and “teacher friendly”. Based on their comments, Robertson and Thomson found that there were many areas where the program was effective in conveying key body image messages to teachers. They were able to understand:

- a. The meaning of body image
- b. The role of natural diversity and genetics in body size
- c. The concept of health at every size
- d. The media constructed unattainable body
- e. Some ways to approach a body-positive curriculum to address body-based stigma and harassment
- f. That teaching eating disorders is not advisable
- g. The contradictions in teaching body image and healthy food choices together
- h. The impact of the media on body image.

Some of these messages were areas of new learning for teachers while others were areas of heightened understanding. For example, teachers became more aware that their students closely observed the way they treated their own bodies.

Throughout the lessons, teachers found that they were learning alongside the students and that the students themselves were benefitting from the messages about self-esteem, body awareness and body-based bullying. Evidence of teacher awareness of the issues was also clear when many asked for more gender balance in the lessons, feeling that there wasn't enough focus on boys' difficulties accepting their size and weight. Overall teacher training did increase their capacity to discuss body image, however some areas were much easier to take in than others.



A second major observation in Robertson and Thomson's research was that, while teachers were grasping a great deal of the curriculum content, some experienced discomfort teaching certain aspects or found that their overall knowledge of body image messages was not strong enough to tackle follow-up questions from students. In this case, they proposed a more scripted approach to the curriculum and ongoing support. Teachers' own body image was also recognized as a potential barrier to effective instruction.

TEACHERS ACKNOWLEDGED THAT SOME OF THEIR DISCOMFORT STEMMED FROM PERSONAL ISSUES WITH THEIR OWN BODY IMAGE.

The program was counter-cultural to the messages teachers had internalized from their peers and the media. In many cases they felt like they were the only ones promoting body acceptance to their students and that their voice was getting lost amongst the others.

THE BODY IMAGE PROGRAM HELPED HIGHLIGHT THE JUXTAPOSITION OF THE TEACHER WITHIN SCHOOLS AND SOCIETY.

Based on teacher responses, Robertson and Thomson felt that each teacher's perception of his or her own body image needed to be addressed before they could most effectively teach all aspects of the curriculum. This became particularly evident when a number of teachers responded that they felt students should have control over how they looked, taking a more individualistic approach to health over an empowering approach. Teachers have been exposed to the same views as the general population when it comes to weight and size, and will need further training to help them break away from simple solutions to a complex issue.

There is a need to work together with researchers, policy makers and parents to implement a new model of empowerment for students, making them mindful of their diverse bodies without telling them that they are individually responsible for how they look. From the voices of the teachers in this study, Robertson and Thomson reveal much about teacher perceptions of themselves, and the challenges with introducing a program that is inherently counter-cultural.

Summary provided by Kalin Moon (2013).

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