Evaluating the Influence of Media on Female Student’s Body Image (Age 9-13): A Literature Review

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Background

In Ontario the way we approach the subject of Body Image and Healthy self esteem in the publically funded school system is through the subject of Health and Physical Education (Bonnell, 2004). However; increasingly educators are noticing that the efforts being made by the provincial curriculum are not enough; students are constantly faced with societal pressures for conformity and messages of insignificants (Clay, 2005). The way that students interact with their world is also changing. Students are spending more time each day with advertising and media influences. One survey done in the US indicates that by the time children reach grade 7 almost all students are connected to the internet, and the vast majority (72%) are spending around 6.5 hours a day in front of the computer or television (Coyle, 2009).

The purpose of the study is to examine that the role that media plays of the development of self concept for young girls (9-13). Through personal experience as well as the review of relevant literature, it has become evident that this issue is an emerging need in society. Obesity rates are dramatically on the rise. Obesity has become a pressing issue in society; as many as 27% of youth were deemed obese in a 2006 study (Coyle, 2009). Determining the various contributing factors for obesity is essential however not central to this particular study. This study looks at the various self esteem and body image of young girls of all various weights and sizes. I also did not confine my search to just weight related self esteem and body image issues. One of the articles that I selected (Dohnt, 2006) looked at a wider variety of body related issues affecting today’s female youth and made strong connections to the role of media in formulating these concerns.

To date educators have done a good job identifying the issues surrounding the media. However, the extent of the issue has not thoroughly been explored. Also, (as of yet) there has not been any substantial changes made to the Ontario curriculum that would realign the counter messages with the current scope of media penetration. The purpose of this investigation is create a more complete picture of
the scope of the issues surrounding girl’s views of self; this will be done bone by contrasting/comparing relevant body image research vs. the role that the media plays in the formation of the view of self held by girls ages 9-13.

Methodology

A comprehensive search for literature was conducted across several major databases including (Ebscohost, Proquest and Wilson Full Text). Initial sweeps unearthed articles number into the hundreds. Articles were further skimmed down by utilizing key words such as; girls, body image, media, and school age. As a result 23 articles were originally considered. A secondary reduction was conducted to reduce the final count to a more manageable 10. Articles were excluded because they were either outside of the target age/gender range (girls 9-13), or they did not deal directly with media as a central issue. This was done by reading the articles and selecting those that had a more direct link and focus towards the overall intention of this literature review. For a complete list of articles please see the reference section of this text. The articles were limited to peer reviewed sources published in the past 10 years (2001 – Present). The majority of the articles (7) were scholarly sources from reputable educational journals. Two additional articles were mass media publications and one source published by the Canadian Press was an announcement outlining the launch of a new positive body image program and the reasons for the programs initiation.

Results and Discussion

Methodology Used to Review Studies
Sample Size: The articles and cases studies utilized had samples sizes ranging from 0-925 the majority of the studies had between than 80-150 respondents. 40% or (n=4) cases studied did not utilize primary data or study actual respondents; however, instead looked at alternative trends and factors for analysis.

Factors of Respondents: The Articles selected were chosen because of their adherence to the search parameters of the study. All respondents studied were female however, ages ranged from 3-16 years old depending on the goals and trends of the specific studies.

Collection/Sampling Methods: Survey was the primary mode of response for students; however, in addition to survey many of the studies utilized various methods of observation and qualitative feedback as a method of response. 60% (n=6) of all of the literature reviewed utilized some form of combined observed reflection in combination with oral feedback to generate their responses. Again 3 of the papers reviewed were mass media publication opposed to journal articles and therefore, they did not utilize respondent participation or feedback.
Data Analysis: Various different articles chose to utilize different methods of data analysis. The most reasonable design to determine the effect of media influence on body image was a comparative pre vs. post exposure comparison; however, this was only utilized by 20% (n=2) of the included studies. Mixed data analysis seemed to have a highly effective method of exploring study responses. The combination of quantitative analysis balanced in conjunctures with qualitative data proved to be a highly effective method of assessing responses.

Findings

Correlation Between age and Self Image: One of the most substantial findings that came about as a result of the literature was the difference between young girls (age 4-9) and those in the target range of this particular study (9-13). Very young children tend to select characters and role models that they feel they align with and already have something in common with; whereas older children are more likely to select a character or role model first and then attempt to align and find points of commonality as a secondary factor (Hayes, 2010). An additional study (Clay, 2009) also found that as girls got older they became more sensitive and thus susceptible to media messages.

The Role of Media and Advertising: Many of the papers agree there is a pronounced role that the media plays in terms of shaping the way girls value their bodies. In a recent study, 100 girls age 9-12 were asked questions related to their view of self and factors related to body image (49%) of respondents felt that they needed to be thinner (Clark, 2007). In the study by (Lawrie, 2006) almost all respondents (n=925) that the images in the media attach a negative stigma to being overweight. (Clay, 2009) found that girls who were exposed to media literacy messages at a younger age were better able to decode the messages and were as a result less at risk of negative self esteem as a result of media messages.

The Influences of Peers: Having a supportive peer environment that has shared goals and common interests was a key factor in terms of helping students to develop their concept of self (Coyl, 2009). Coyl also went onto indicate that children tend to develop most through a series of interaction, comparison and feedback from others. Another concept that had not been considered prior was the idea that the conversations that children have with their peers shapes the overall influence and views of self more so then the actual exposure to the media (Clark, 2007). In this instance the media played a more passive role whereas the process of decoding the media and exploring the concepts with peers was critical to the way that girls viewed the message and essential themselves as a result.

The Rising Obesity Rate and Media Exposure of Youth: As mentioned earlier (Coyle, 2007) found a significant relationship to the number of hours that students
spent each day in front of a “screen media” and the child’s propensity towards obesity. A study conducted by (Herbozo, 2007) indicated that young children tend to have a more predominate understanding of avoiding obesity then they do a desire for thinness. The study conducted by Sylvia Herbozo also found that the images and characters in screen media tended to deal much more with body image and thinness then those portrayed in children’s print (storybooks). All of these combined factors, in combination with the relentless persistence of the media; appear to perpetuate the negative stereotypes associated with being overweight (Lawrie, 2006). This continues to demonstrate that the more time children spend with the media the more susceptible they become to the messages.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

Further research on the topic of body image in relationship to the media is essential to helping shape our understanding. As the media continues to change and evolve so does the way that children relate to and decipher the messages. One element that would be interesting to explore is what causes the negative coloration between age and self esteem. Nothing thus far in the literature has seemed to explore why as girls get older they become less self confident and more susceptible to media messages of inadequacy.

Different studies such as (Clay, 2005) suggest that early intervention and teaching our students critical media literacy skills at a young age is essential to helping them to understand and avoid negative body image pitfalls. I have not yet been able to find any form of study (ethnography included) that looks at early intervention of media education vs. the impact on self esteem during the pre-teen years.

**Summary**

This article offers an analysis of only 10 studies that have been conducted examining the relationship between the media and body image. Although a lot of really positive research has been done and solid suggestions have been made there is still more work to be done. Despite the fact that most of the articles (70% n=7) did not contain specifically Canadian content, the specific findings of the articles still held relevant and meaningful suggestions that can be utilized when attempting to reconcile the Ontario Media Literacy curriculum with the needs of our female students.

Society is changing quickly, and the role that the media plays in the lives of our female students is still not fully understood. In order to help increase the confidence and self esteem of our female students there is still more work to be done. As teachers and researchers we desire to bring meaningful strategies into the classroom that will help girls feel good about themselves regardless of physical appearance. However, before in order to maximize our efforts more attention must be paid to the role that the media plays in shaping self value and how we can work to counteract these influences.


