



Body Image in Primary Schools: A pilot evaluation of a primary school intervention program designed by teachers to improve children's body satisfaction



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 29 April 2015

Received in revised form 19 July 2016

Accepted 3 September 2016

Keywords:

Children
Interventions
Primary school
Media pressure
Body image
Prevention

ABSTRACT

Body Image in the Primary School (Hutchinson & Calland, 2011) is a body image curriculum that is widely available but has not yet been evaluated. This study evaluates a set of 6 of the 49 available lessons from this curriculum. Seventy-four girls and 70 boys aged 9–10 were recruited from four primary schools in the UK. Schools were randomly allocated into the intervention condition, where students received 6 hours of body image lessons, or to lessons as normal. Body esteem was significantly higher among girls in the intervention group, compared to the control group, immediately post intervention, and at 3-month follow-up. Moreover, girls with lowest levels of body esteem at baseline reported the largest gains. Internalization was significantly lower among boys in the control group compared to the intervention group at 3-month follow-up. The pattern of results among the control group raises interesting issues for intervention evaluation.

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Introduction

Prospective studies demonstrate that body dissatisfaction during late childhood and adolescence is associated with increased negative affect (Ferreiro, Seoane, & Senra, 2012; Stice & Bearman, 2001), reduced levels of physical activity (Neumark-Sztainer, Paxton, Hannan, Haines, & Story, 2006), and is a risk factor for the development of eating disorders (Ferreiro et al., 2012; Stice, Marti, & Durant, 2011). There is also evidence that body dissatisfaction develops during childhood with 40–50% of 6- to 12-year-olds reporting that they are unhappy with the way they look (Smolak, 2011). Consequently, body image interventions have been designed to engage preadolescents in the hope of preventing or reducing body image concerns before they become entrenched (Paxton,

2002; Ross, Paxton, & Rodgers, 2013; Smolak & Levine, 2001). The current study evaluates a 6 lesson portion of *Body Image in the Primary School* (Hutchinson & Calland, 2011). This 49-lesson curriculum, published in the UK, is designed for children ages 5 through 11 and has been recognised with a Body Confidence Award from the UK All Party Parliamentary Group on Body Image in 2012. However, it has not been empirically tested.

Schools are an ideal setting for health promotion interventions due to the potential to embed developmentally appropriate activities into the existing curriculum, providing access to all young people (Yager, Diedrichs, Ricciardelli, & Halliwell, 2013). Body image is a multidimensional construct that incorporates cognitive, affective and behavioural components (Smolak & Cash, 2011). Assessing the breadth of the body image construct in children is problematic and is hampered by a lack of understanding of developmental trajectories in the emergence of different body image components and a limited number of validated measures for this age group (Smolak, 2011). However, measures of evaluative and affective components of children's body image have been validated (Hill, 2011; Smolak, 2011) and a number of programs have been successful in improving these components of body image among preadolescents (i.e., <12 years). Indeed, a handful of interventions

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have found improvements in body image at post-intervention (Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2008; Halliwell, Easun, & Harcourt, 2011; McVey, Davis, Tweed, & Shaw 2004; Ross et al., 2013; Wick et al., 2011), and at longer follow-up periods including 6 weeks (Duncan, Al-Nakeeb, & Nevill, 2009), 3 months (Bird, Halliwell, Diedrichs, & Harcourt, 2013; Yeh, Liou, & Chien, 2012), and 24 months (Smolak & Levine, 2001) in comparison to control groups (e.g., class as usual). In some studies where effects have been analyzed separately for boys and girls, intervention effects have been stronger and more sustained among girls (Bird et al., 2013; Smolak & Levine, 2001).

Based on sociocultural models of body image (Tiggemann, 2011), these effective programs have largely focused on reducing risk factors for the development of body dissatisfaction such as sociocultural pressures (e.g., the impact of peers and media influences), body comparisons, and internalization of appearance ideals. Effective programs have utilized approaches such as movement and physical activity (Duncan et al., 2009), or the reading of a storybook (specifically *Shapesville*) (Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2008).

A substantial number of programs, however, have not reported significant improvements in body image despite using innovative approaches such as working with a local theatre company to develop and perform a theatre production (Haines, Neumark-Sztainer, Perry, Hannan, & Levine, 2006). Furthermore, some of these programs have utilized a whole school approach, which goes beyond the provision of a content based curriculum to address the sociocultural environment in which these problems develop (McVey, Tweed & Blackmore, 2007; Stock et al., 2007). Again, these impressive, resource intensive efforts have not demonstrated improvements in body image among the intervention group, as compared to the control group. Clearly, there is considerable variability in the impact of different intervention programs despite targeting known risk factors. Therefore, it is important that novel body image interventions are evaluated before endorsement and widespread dissemination.

The current study aims to evaluate the impact of part of a body image curriculum that was developed by teachers for the primary school classroom in the UK, based on their review of the body image literature and their own extensive experience of working with primary school children. The program has been published as a book, *Body Image in the Primary School* (Hutchinson & Calland, 2011).

Given that the program is readily available and has not been evaluated, the aim of this study was to establish whether the lessons have an impact on children's body image. In line with existing effective programs (e.g., Bird et al., 2013), the *Body Image in the Primary School* intervention is designed to target a number of risk factors for the development of body dissatisfaction, including media influences and peer pressure. The program consists of class discussions, game playing, worksheets, and role plays. Given that the content and delivery of this program is comparable to existing effective interventions, it was predicted that girls and boys who were randomly allocated to take part in the six session *Body Image in Primary School* intervention would report improved body image and intervention topic knowledge in comparison to the class as usual control group. Moreover, it was hypothesized that children in the *Body Image in the Primary School* intervention would report reduced media influence compared with the control group. Specifically, it was predicted that girls and boys in the intervention group would report reduced internalization of appearance ideals, reduced awareness of appearance ideals, and reduced perceived pressure from the media to match appearance ideals in comparison to the control group.

Method

Participants

Participants were 74 girls and 70 boys aged 9 and 10 years (girls $M_{age} = 9.46$, $SD_{age} = 0.50$; girls $M_{BMI} = 17.87$, $SD_{BMI} = 3.89$; boys $M_{age} = 9.49$, $SD_{age} = 0.53$; boys $M_{BMI} = 17.68$, $SD_{BMI} = 4.14$), recruited from four primary schools in the south-west of England. The majority of participants were White (92%). The schools were comparable on percentage of pupils with special educational needs, entitled to free school meals, and speaking English as an additional language. Two schools were smaller than the average UK primary school (<200 students, one control, one intervention), one was average size (control), and one was above average size (intervention). Year 5 classes from two schools were randomly assigned to the intervention condition (girls $n = 39$, boys $n = 40$) and Year 5 classes in the other two schools were assigned to the control condition (girls $n = 35$, boys $n = 30$).

Materials

Intervention. The intervention materials were taken from *Body Image in the Primary School* (Hutchinson & Calland, 2011), which presents a body image curriculum for primary schools. The curriculum is separated into a set of 16 key stage one (UK curriculum content for children aged 4–7) and 33 key stage two (UK curriculum content for children aged 7–11) step by step lesson plans. The majority of past intervention evaluation studies with preadolescents has included children aged 7–12 (e.g., Bird et al., 2013; Duncan et al., 2009; McVey et al., 2004; Ross et al., 2013; Smolak & Levine, 2001). Therefore, the current evaluation focused on the key stage two lessons for 7- to 11-year-olds. The key stage two lesson plans address four core themes: valuing diversity in appearance, celebrating one's own unique appearance, managing appearance related teasing, and developing resilience to media and peer pressures about appearance. Based on discussions between the first author and the authors of *Body Image in the Primary School* six lessons were selected for this evaluation. Lessons from each theme that most strongly targeted body dissatisfaction and media pressures were selected. This created a set of six, one hour lessons, which were representative of the whole *Body Image in the Primary School* curriculum. The focus of each lesson and the learning outcomes are listed in Table 1. The intervention content was delivered through brainstorming exercises, class discussion, small group work, work in pairs, game playing, role play, and viewing film clips. Each session began with an introduction and recap, and ended with a summary of the learning during that session. In the final session there was also a summary of the key learnings across the six weeks.

Measures

The measures used in this study were selected based on their suitability for children aged 9 and 10 years.

Body image concerns. Body image concerns were assessed by the Revised Body Esteem Scale (BES) developed by Mendelson and White (1993). The BES was designed to assess children's attitudes and feelings towards their body and appearance overall (Mendelson & White, 1993). It consists of 20 items, such as "I'm proud of my body" and "I wish I was thinner", assessing children's overall satisfaction with their appearance, and with their weight. The response format for this scale was modified so that children reported their agreement with each statement on a 5-point Likert scale that ranges from 1 (*disagree a lot*) to 5 (*agree a lot*). The BES

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