

Investigating Educator Perceptions of Body-Rich Language on Student Self-Image, Body-Consciousness and School Climate

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Abstract : Schools have a responsibility to implement school-wide frameworks that actively prevent, detect, and support all aspects of child development and learning. Such efforts can range from individual or classroom-level supports to school-wide primary prevention practices for the school's infrastructure or climate. This study assessed the perceptions of educators across a variety of disciplines in Connecticut (i.e., elementary and secondary education, special education, school psychology, and school social work) on the perceived impact of their beliefs, language, and behavior about food and body consciousness on student self-image and school climate. Participants (N=50) completed a short electronic questionnaire measuring perceptions of how their behavior can influence their students' opinions about themselves, their emerging self-image, and the overall climate of the school community. Secondly, the beliefs that were directly assessed in the first portion of the survey were further measured through the use of applied social vignettes involving students directly or as bystanders. Preliminary findings are intriguing. When asked directly, 100% of the respondents reported that what they say to students directly could influence student opinions about themselves and 98% of participants further agreed that their behavior both to and in front of students could impact a student's developing self-image. Likewise, 82% of the sample agreed that their personal language and behavior affect the overall climate of a school building. However, when the above beliefs were assessed via applied social vignettes depicting routine social exchanges, results were significantly more widespread (i.e., results were evenly dispersed among levels of agreement and disagreement across participants in all areas). These preliminary findings offer humble but critical implications for informing integrated school wellness frameworks that aim to create body-sensitive school communities. Research indicates that perceptions about body image, attitudes about eating, and the onset of disordered eating practices surface in school-aged years. Schools provide a natural setting for instilling foundations for child wellness as a natural extension of existing school climate reform efforts. These measures do not always need to be expansive or extreme. Rather, educators have a ripe opportunity to become champions for health and wellness through increased self-awareness and subtle shifts in language and behavior. Future psychological research needs to continue to explore this line of inquiry using larger and more varied samples of educators in order to identify needs in teacher training and development that can yield positive and preventative health outcomes for children.

Keywords : body-sensitive schools, integrated school health, school climate reform, teacher awareness

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