

Challenging Appearance Bias: An Embodied and Collective Approach

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Abstract: Collaborating with youth, we co-designed a program to increase body image satisfaction through challenging the cultural narrative around appearance ideals. The emerging curriculum builds on an evidence-based cognitive dissonance program through integration of embodiment and activism practices. Results of program pilot studies indicate that youth engaged in challenging society's appearance ideals, listening to their bodies, and practicing self-compassion. Program participation was associated with increases in belonging and trends of improvement in body acceptance and self-liking.

Introduction

Body image dissatisfaction is common among female adolescents (Craike, et al., 2016) and a significant predictor of eating disorders (Stice, 2002). Eating disorders have a multitude of health consequences (Sangvai, 2016), including one of the highest mortality rates of any psychiatric conditions (Smink, van Hoeken, & Hoek, 2012). Moreover, eating disorder treatment utilization is low (Kazdin, Fitzsimmons-Craft, & Wilfley, 2017). These realities underscore the importance of prevention efforts. One of the most widely studied and supported eating disorder prevention programs, the Body Project, targets body image dissatisfaction through engaging practices to promote cognitive dissonance (Stice & Presnell, 2007; Stice, Shaw, Becker, & Rhode, 2008). We built on the foundation of this program, in collaboration with youth, to co-design an expanded program that also engages practices of embodiment, agency, and activism to shift the cultural narrative around appearance ideals.

Theoretical framings

Our work draws heavily from the theory of cognitive dissonance and the evidence that engaging cognitive dissonance through the Body Project program decreases risk of eating disorders (Stice, et al., 2008). We also emphasize the experiences of embodied learning to support youth in feeling grounded through recognizing and honoring the experiences of their own body (Abrahamson & Lindgren, 2014). To encourage voice, we emphasize supporting both individual and institutional change through situating learning and identity development within the social and cultural world in which learning transpires.

Methods

Iterative cycle of program design

The design and study of an emerging curriculum included a series of research activities. Our team of researchers, school partners, and youth carried out a number of specific studies to allow us to listen and learn from key stakeholders in the community. Methodologies included: mixed methods data collection at community events, environmental scan of existing models in the literature, youth-led arts-based qualitative inquiry to explore the construct of "groundedness," and exploration of how cultural frameworks are associated with perceptions of eating disorders. We also conducted an evaluation of the Body Project, an evidence-based eating disorder prevention program using a peer-delivery model within high schools. We also convened a "co-design week" where researchers, district personnel, and youth participants synthesized findings from these studies and engaged in an iterative cycle of curriculum design aimed at the program. To inform processes of revision and ensure relevance and applicability, we conducted pilots with young women in middle and high school. The iterative process ultimately led to the version of the program that is currently being evaluated with a randomized controlled trial.

Designed program

The emerging curriculum was designed to decrease body dissatisfaction, increase self-awareness and embodied experience, and promote agency in addressing sociocultural pressures around appearance. Experiences include

role playing responses to appearance biases, writing a letter to a younger girl, and practicing self-compassion and somatic meditation. The curriculum culminated in the creation of youth-led group activism projects oriented at creating community and institutional change consistent with the individual change targeted by the program.

Measurement of design program

Survey data were collected from a small pilot study with middle-school participants (n=9), focused on the feasibility of measuring body acceptance and responsiveness, self-liking and self-competence, and social justice. Qualitative data, including open-ended surveys, class feedback, and focus groups, were collected from two pilot studies. Findings were analyzed via inductive analysis to inform curriculum design decisions (e.g., timing of activities and resources).

Findings

Survey data indicated the feasibility of measurement of social belonging, body responsiveness, body acceptance, self-liking and self-competence. General themes from weekly qualitative feedback forms suggested appreciation for the main skills taught throughout the program, such as challenging society's appearance ideals, listening to one's body, and self-compassion. Feedback on which program skills were most useful revealed that identifying appearance biases, feeling grounded, and clarifying goals were most beneficial. Focus group feedback highlighted enjoyment of the program, benefits from shifting the ways of relating to one's body, experiences of embodiment and groundedness, and usefulness of key program activities, such as activism activities.

Discussion

A participatory co-design team of youth, school personnel, and researchers built on the foundation of an evidence-based program, the Body Project (Stice & Presnell, 2007; Stice et al., 2008), to expand tools for youth, including speaking back to the appearance bias, embodiment via practices of groundedness and collaborative, youth-led activism projects. Via pilot studies, we observed ways that youth engaged in program practices designed to shift the ways that they self-identify, moving the focus to noticing and appreciating their bodies and creating a community of peers dedicated to shifting the cultural narrative around appearance biases.

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