

2020 Premier’s Hicksons Lawyers Health Education and Wellbeing Scholarship

Preparing teachers to address body image issues arising from student fixation of social media

Sheridan Worthington

Macquarie Fields High School

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# Introduction

Social media provides young people with a multitude of health information at an incredible rate of speed. There is an increase in exposure of images due to young people using social media and a constant reminder of ‘beauty ideals’. This expectation set by social media dominant discourse can provoke many negative behaviours amongst high school students.

It is concerning that there appears to be no direct correlation in the current Personal Development, Health and Physical Education (PDHPE) curriculum between body image and the increasing usage of social media in young people. Further, it is concerning that more social media literacy resources have not been developed that can be used both in and beyond the classroom to support our students with this increasing issue. It is also of concern that young people are consuming ‘health’ information online which can be unreliable and young people may not have the skills to question its integrity.

There is a slight inclusion of body image and social media, separately, in the NSW PDHPE Syllabus K-10. It is also featured within the PDHPE Life Ready program, Community and Family Studies Curriculum, the Food Technology Curriculum and the Society & Culture Curriculum. However, despite these inclusions, there are limited resources available to educators that cater towards education in body image. The curriculum also would benefit from a more obvious link in connecting social media literacy and it’s correlation to body image issues.

It is evident that many students have a clear fixation and reliance upon social media and this has a strong correlation with youth disordered eating in contemporary Australia. The 2019 Mission Australia Youth Survey Report recorded that roughly three in ten young people were either extremely concerned or very concerned about body image (31%) and mental health (33.2%). Engeln (2017) states that the increasing rise of social media use is closely linked to young people; greater internalising the thin beauty ideal, increased self-objectification. Therefore, it is highly evident that media literacy resources should be in a much larger demand for NSW schools.

# Focus of Study

The focus of this study tour was to investigate the types of programs, teaching materials and resources that can be used to support teachers and parents in NSW schools in targeting the link between body image issues and media literacy. It is imperative that schools should be focusing on this issue, hence, there is a clear demand for further research in support, awareness and education in order to take a preventative approach.

The PDHPE curriculum acknowledges media literacy and body image to be taught, although, resources regarding this content are often outdated and sparse. It is evident that research is required to create new resources to successfully meet the curriculum requirements.

The study tour incorporated a range of school, university, media centre and health centre visits as well as meetings with a range of non-for-profit organisations. These visits and meetings took place in eight different states across the United States of America, Canada and Australia. The tour provided me the opportunity to engage with leaders in the field of media literacy and body image. I was able to engage in academic conversation, interview authors and experience different programs that addressed key issues I aimed to investigate.

# Significant Learning

As I progressed throughout my scholarship tour it became evident that the knowledge gained would be advantageous to my development of resources and practises I was willing to implement back into the Department of Education NSW school system. I acquired further knowledge and skills to assist in how to combat body image issues and increase the level of media literacy being taught throughout and beyond the classroom.

Throughout the tour, a number of themes occurred. These will be further explored in this report:

* Student education in media literacy is highly necessary in preventing the increasing amount of cases of body image issues
* Increased awareness and education for students in proven successful both in and beyond the classroom setting
* Student empowerment is vital for social change to occur when fighting the dominant discourse
* The support and active engagement of parents, carers and the broader community is required to ensure the support of student engagement.

### Student education in media literacy is necessary in preventing the increase of body image issues

Tiggemann & Zaccardo (2018) argue that there is a limited representation in the range of body types in images tagged #fitspiration. Currently, if you use the hashtag #fitspiration on Instagram, there are over 18 million posts exposing young people to an array of images. Therefore, it is suggested that media literacy programs must have a focus on social networking sites. McLean, Paxton & Wertheim (2016) propose that when students are educated they become media literate and are less likely to socially compare themselves to unrealistic beauty standards.

Through my discussions with Dr Bobbie Eisenstock from California State University it became apparent very quickly that she too, agrees that media literacy is an essential requirement for preventing body image issues in young people. She emphasised the importance that as society increases their engagement with the media, it is crucial for people know how to protect themselves from the unnatural body ideals that the media presents. Eisenstock mentioned that cognitive dissonance is particularly common in young people and that W.P Davidson’s “Third Person Effect Theory” can be of great significance to body image issues. Choi, Leshner & Choi (2008) suggest that individuals tend to believe that others are influenced more by unrealistic body images more than themselves. As a result of this effect, they found that women believed that society would expect the idealised body image as the beauty norm rather than a more natural and realistic body image.

Eisenstock is passionate about civic engagement projects and as a result provided by her direction, her students from California State University, Northridge partnered with National Eating Disorders Organisation to develop the [GET REAL! Toolkit](https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/sites/default/files/Toolkits/getrealmedialliteracytoolkit/index.html). The tool kit is designed to engage, educate and empower young people about media and body image in the digital media culture. She discussed that the ‘Media literacy key questions worksheet’ is an exceptional resource for secondary classrooms to assist student understanding in media literacy.

Attending [MediaSmarts](https://mediasmarts.ca/) in Ontario, Canada to meet with Matthew Johnson, Director of Education, and Tricia Grant, Manager of Marketing and Communications, was an insightful experience learning how this non-for-profit organisation develops high-quality digital and media literacy resources that are designed for Canadian homes, schools and communities. Johnson discussed how Ontario was the first province in Canada to incorporate media literacy into their school curriculum. It is evident there is some incorporation of media literacy in the Australian Curriculum, however, evidence suggests that there should be a heavier focus. Holland & Tiggemann (2016) explain that media literacy is a proven successful method to combat negative body image. Grant and Johnson also mentioned in previous years, the Federal Government provided funding in Ontario for pre-service teachers to partake in digital and media literacy training, as part of the teaching degree requirements. They made the comment that this provided beginning educators with more confidence to appropriately address and educate on these ever-changing media literacy issues.

Interestingly, there has been a very high demand for parent resources through MediaSmarts. This was a large focus in the meeting regarding parental education and involvement in the media literacy education programs. Johnson explained that as educators, it is important to provide support and guidance for parents continuing to guide and educate students at home on these issues.

Located in New York City (NYC) is the [Paley Center for media](https://www.paleycenter.org/). Associate Director of Education Rebekah Fisk facilitates an education program within the centre. In 2013 Samantha Levine developed a self esteem initiative, ‘the New York City Girls Project’, endorsed by the NYC Mayor’s Office (M. Bloomberg) and partnered with the Paley Center and SPARK movement. This was regarded as the first major city in the USA to tackle body image issues in such a public space. The NYC Government 2013 discovered that 40-70 percent of girls were dissatisfied with two or more parts of their body and that this body satisfaction is at its lowest point when girls are aged 12-15 years old. Fisk explained that the education program held at the media centre at the time of the initiative was so successful, that seven years forward the program still continues for local schools to regularly visit the centre to experience the program.

### Awareness and education is proven successful both in and beyond the classroom

It became apparent from my discussions that particularly the idea of small group education sessions proves most successful when addressing body image issues. Breithaupt, Eickman, Byrne, Fischer (2016) suggest that small group programs run in schools are beneficial and, in many ways, are also cost effective. However, they also discuss that current models of education in media literacy and body image issues that involve interweaving it into mandatory courses such as PDHPE can have a limited effect. This is not necessarily an incorrect way to educate on these issues, however, a targeted or volunteer program is proven far more effective as it tends to increase student empowerment and motivation.

The main purpose of my meeting with Carolyn Becker at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas was to discuss [‘The Body Project Collaborative’](https://www.bodyprojectcollaborative.com/) created by Eric Strice and pioneered by C. Becker. The Body Project (BP) was designed as a dissonance based body-acceptance program aimed at female high school and college students that incorporates the evaluation and critique of beauty ideals through written, verbal and behavioural activities. C.B. Becker & E. Stice (2017) reflect on the scalability model where results were positive when task-shifting to a train-the-trainer model. Becker discovered that using undergraduate peers at university as trainers were inexpensive and highly successful, with peers generating similar effects to when clinicians ran the course. With this evidence, I can assume that incorporating the train-the-trainer model in a high school setting would be successful and also financially viable, as the training would be at little to no cost. In the meeting with C. Becker, she provided advice suggesting that high school teachers that offer to be facilitators should be both committed and passionate about the advocacy for body image resilience to ensure the program provides longevity and successful results. The program is implemented in 25 different countries across the globe.

The National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) in New York City partnered with BP at the beginning of 2012. NEDA also endorsed the evidence-based the train-the-trainer model as it was cost effective and they could reach a larger audience, with over 165 trainers implementing the program in low SES high schools across the state. Students enjoyed the program so much they were requesting a longer version of the program with follow-up meetings (C.B. Becker & E. Stice 2017).

Eating Disorders Victoria (EDV) implemented the BP in Australia in partnership with The Body Project Collaborative in 2017, renaming it ‘Body Project Australia’. Through face to face and online discussions with the Senior Director of Programs at EDV, Lauren Bruce and her team, it became more apparent that New South Wales high school students could greatly benefit from this program at no cost. Research confirms that the low-tech approach provides greater opportunity for face-to-face interaction and this allows for greater connection with the content (C.B.Becker & E.Stice 2017).

In The Lifeology Counselling Clinic in Fortworth, Texas, Jessica Latchaw holds a Body Image course designed for females only. This course is a volunteer-based program that is designed for girls and women who experience body image issues. J. Latchaw explained that because of this dominant discourse of ‘fitspiration,’ it has been very easy to disguise the pressures and measures to achieve this new look as ‘health’. She discussed that many will give in to these pressures which encourages the downward spiral into disordered eating and obsessive exercise. Each session, participants partake in a range of activities designed to target body image issues. Many of these learning activities would be highly suited to the PDHPE curriculum, such as activities based on what creates body image concerns, personal values, critically analysing why many feel the need to conform to these social norms and how to fight against these unhealthy norms.

Meeting with Lexie Kite, co-founder and co-director of [Beauty Redefined](https://www.morethanabody.org/) in New York City, provided a valuable opportunity to learn about another successful body image resilience course that has a direct focus on media literacy, self-purpose, resilience, confidence and redefining beauty. The course can be delivered online or in face-to-face sessions, providing a larger audience. Kite designed this program with her sister Lindsay to educate women that women’s bodies are ‘designed to be an instrument, not an ornament’. In the meeting with Kite, it was discussed that women should focus on body functionality, as this redirection of focus allows individuals to discover that there are more positive outcomes to focus on rather than self-objectification. Alleva, Martijn, Van Breuklen, Jansen & Karos (2015) consider a focus on body functionality to be greatly beneficial to women’s body image. Focusing on the capability of bodies rather than the how bodies look, results in greater body satisfaction and confidence.

### Student empowerment is required for social change to occur

The intention to meet with Dr Sarah Hillyer founder and director at the Center for Sport, Peace and Society at the University of Tennessee was to learn about their highly successful partnership in the [U.S Department of State Global Sports Mentoring Program (GSMP)](https://globalsportsmentoring.org/) and how they developed and utilised ‘The Theory of Social Empowerment’. The GSPM has two pillars: GPSN Empower Women through Sports and GSMP Sport for Community. U.S. Embassies around the globe nominate individuals with a determination to make change, experience in the sports sector, and skills in leadership. These ‘delegates’ are selected by the GSMP team and paired with top executives in U.S based organisations. The mentorship is designed for delegates to develop strategic plans to create sporting opportunities for underserved populations in their country. Delegates are then expected to implement the initiatives planned, share what they have learnt through GSPM and transform communities by using sport as a tool for positive change. The Center for Sport, Peace and Society (2012), base their GSMP on the ‘Theory of Empowerment for Social Change’ using the following principles;

* Expose individuals to new resources, networks and ideas
* Equip individuals to target issues in their communities
* Engage individuals in new exchanges and experiences
* Entrust individuals to carry out their own vision for change

This theory could be easily implemented into school based body image programs to equip individuals to promote social change and empower students to fight against the dominant discourse.

Evidence shows that those who play sport have the skills to challenge gender stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes. Vartanian, Wharton & Green (2011) suggest that promoting exercise for health reasons over appearance goals reduces the harmful impact of appearance motives, thus reducing body image issues. Evidence also shows that sport assists in girls developing a positive sense of identity by focusing on body functionality, placing a greater value in body appreciation and less on body objectification (Mulgrew, McCulloch, Farren, Prichard & Lim 2017).

At Bluevalley Northwest High School (BVNW) (Kansas, USA) body image education is a priority both in and beyond the classroom. Health teacher and volleyball coach Molly Haggerty allowed me to observe her lesson delivered on body image issues and the importance of media literacy. Haggerty explained that students highly enjoyed this topic in health education classes as students could easily relate to the content and appreciated engaging in discussion surrounding the content taught. She also explained that an afternoon social club , ‘REbeL’, was a successful club that ran up until last year (2019) when the non-for-profit organisation created by L. Eickman in 2008 lost funding. The peer education program was designed to change the definition of health and beauty for students and to challenge the dominant discourse society has set in regards to appearance. Breithaupt, et al. (2016) suggests that the REbeL club reduces stigmatisation due to being a volunteer based program and it aims to motivate and empower students to educate their peers and push back against societal pressures. Supporting the main concept of inspiring students to “rebel” against the unrealistic beauty standards, Haggerty explained that students created a ‘movement’ which inspired other students around the school to make change.

Professor of psychology at Northwestern University in Chicago and author of the book ‘Beauty Sick’, Professor Renee Engeln (PhD), exposed some thought provoking concepts and ideas in how society should address this cultural obsession with these appearance ideals. During my interview with Engeln, she agreed that education in media literacy is essential to target prevention of body image issues, however, she argued that for a real change to occur a ‘teen movement’ is required. She explained that educating teens and allowing them to become angry and passionate is the real cause for change. They are the only group which will be able to truly change this dominant discourse, particularly on online platforms such as Instagram which cultivates this. Interestingly, in her book ‘Beauty Sick’, R. Engeln challenges the success behind Dove’s beauty campaigns, explaining that even though Dove’s advertisements have good intentions, it is responsible for reminding people of these unrealistic beauty expectations and actually having the opposite effect of empowering women.

### Support and active engagement of parents, carers and the broader community

For wellbeing programs to be successful and instil the same values beyond the classroom and school, support is required through parents and caregivers, and community involvement should be encouraged. Girls Inc. is a non-profit U.S organisation that runs after-school based programs for girls aged 5-18 years. Girls Inc. originally began as a girls-only sports program, however, over the past forty-four years the program has developed. The organisation inspires girls to become smart, strong and bold by allowing them to access programs based on media literacy, body image resilience, career exploration, leadership, goal setting, numeracy, literacy, STEM and many more. Not only are these girls exposed to this content at school, they then engage with it again after school hours, challenging stereotypes and encouraging a social change to occur. C.B. Becker & E. Stice (2017) propose that community engagement greatly assists in the success of small body image programs.

Director M. Johnson from Media Smarts argued the importance of providing educative and support resources for parents and carers that provide background information, and providing support materials when educating media literacy and body image concerns that are prevalent beyond the classroom. Media Smarts has dedicated a large component of their online resources targeted towards parents, providing blogs, games, tip sheets, guides, workshops, tutorials and videos. It was shared that all these resources are greatly valued by parents and carers as it provides guidance and an opportunity to engage in both relevant and meaningful conversations in their home setting. Johnson explained that students felt more supported and willing to engage in conversation as a result.

# Conclusion

On completion of my study tour, I concluded that to appropriately address the increasing rate of body image issues in NSW schools, teachers and the broader school community must make it a priority to increase media literacy skills and deliver relevant and up-to-date specialised programs in order to address these issues effectively. I highly suggest that schools consider the social norms and dominant discourse that our students are exposed to on the many online platforms they engage with daily. This high exposure is what teachers need to consider and they should be encouraged to develop their programs to support the ongoing wellbeing needs of students.

I believe that in order to prepare teachers to educate on this ever-growing issue they should be well resourced and well-informed. It is particularly important that PDHPE teachers link media literacy and body image, as I do not believe that this has been specifically proposed in the previous delivery of the curriculum. However, this should not just be limited to the PDHPE lessons, it should be cross-curriculum. The incorporation of this content can be taught in a range of subjects. I aim to use my findings to prepare well developed resources that can be shared with PDHPE and other key learning areas who may choose to address this content. These resources developed should be made available to all NSW teachers in the education system.

I highly recommend that schools should consider small group body acceptance programs such as the Body Project Australia, as it is volunteer-based, allowing students an opportunity for deeper connection and a safe space to share their feelings and experiences to this cognitive dissonance with other like-minded students. This type of environment can empower students to challenge the dominant discourse to promote positive changes in the local school community and beyond.

It is essential that parents are kept informed and provided with resources should they require them to assist in supporting their child’s wellbeing in the current online climate, which can include high exposure to online images, social pressures and posts uploaded by their peers.

Throughout this study tour and further research, I believe that #fitspiration is a double-edged sword. There are many positives to this ‘online movement’, with many young individuals inspired to increase their physical activity levels and engage in healthier lifestyles. However, with constant exposure, many individuals become focused on #fitspiration appearance ideals, which can become harmful and addictive. It is important students learn to become critical thinkers and ensure they are focusing on what their bodies can do, rather than what they look like.

The findings of my study have been documented through blog posts and social media. Through these regular posts, I was able to engage others through my experiences and learning (refer to my [blog](https://sheridanworthington.wixsite.com/mysite?fbclid=IwAR0ptzRwwqdREkqwOVTW53qcTq6wqO5_HmEx-mTQjycQ5f7bnZxFCzOq-L8)). I hope to gain the opportunity to disseminate through presentations and workshops in my workplace, as well as other schools in the local network, ACHPER and the PDHPE Teachers Association. I intend to complete training with EDV to become a train-the-trainer and facilitator of the Body Project Australia to promote the inclusion of this initiative throughout my workplace, to carry out the training of staff in a range of schools and evaluate the success of the program.

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