



Empowering Educators to Combat Bias through Dialogue

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Abstract of study: Race and weight are two highly salient aspects of social identity across the lifespan, but they are acknowledged or understood very differently as issues of bias and social justice. Racism is viewed as a problem and poorly addressed, and weight stigma is rarely noticed (Campbell, 2021). Unlike other domains of prejudice, weight-based oppression persists and is even encouraged (Nutter et. al, 2016). Race and weight represent different kinds of stigma (e.g., discouraged vs. ignored; viewed as stable vs. changeable), but both are associated with systemic injustices that negatively affect the lives and wellbeing of children and adults alike. Schools offer a convenient, accessible place to employ anti-racist practices and liberatory methods. To address biases about race and weight in schools, we developed a novel intervention that draws on intergroup dialogue, critical theories, and culturally responsive research. Working with fifth-grade educators (N=15) in MMSD, we led interactive professional development sessions to expand teachers' knowledge of biases while providing pedagogical tools designed to increase belonging in the classroom. The aim of the project was to help educators support students' awareness of how body image, community, race, health, and justice affect everyone differently. This mixed-methods study employed surveys and interviews data to investigate how teachers' culturally responsive self-efficacy, willingness to confront prejudice, attitudes toward sociocultural appearance norms, and weight bias were affected by participation in the intervention. Exploratory qualitative analyses illuminated the ways in which educators perceive racism and weight stigma in their personal lives and professional praxis. Our primary research questions were as follows:

1. Before and after intervention, what is the overall comfort with, attention to, and experience with the critical-dialogic approach among fifth-grade elementary teachers? How do teachers rate their self-efficacy in leading developmentally appropriate dialogues about social identities of students? How comfortable and skilled do teachers rate themselves in confronting injustices involving bias or stigma around race and weight/body issues?
2. What is the impact of professional development delivered with the critical-dialogic approach on teacher awareness, knowledge, and skills about anti-bias issues? What effects do brief dialogue-based training have on teacher perceptions of race and weight? What is the feasibility and acceptability of this training for elementary teachers?
3. What themes, patterns, and connections to ongoing discourses about race and weight emerged from teacher interviews?

Intervention Overview:

Teachers attended two 90-minute professional development sessions on Zoom to learn more regarding racism, weight bias, and bias reduction strategies. Researchers led the teachers in dialogues, instructed them how to facilitate dialogues with their students, and explained the effectiveness of the critical-dialogic approach. Following each PD, teachers were asked to facilitate a dialogue with students of at least 20 minutes in length and with at least six students. Most sessions occurred virtually via Zoom. Researchers observed each session and teachers were provided detailed feedback and ongoing support.

Major findings:

Confidence & Comfort (R1): Quantitative and qualitative data provided support that the intervention had its intended effect, with significant increases on the Non-Racist Teaching subscale immediately following the intervention and teachers' culturally responsive self-efficacy showing increases at follow-up. Qualitative data suggested teachers improved in their ability to lead dialogues and showed greater awareness of how they talked about bodies and weight both inside and outside the classroom.

Reception of PD, Awareness/Knowledge/Skills, & Feasibility (R2): Results suggested teachers' demonstrated a significant increase in awareness, knowledge, and skills regarding bias but not necessarily for confronting bias. Educators suggested the materials, training sessions, and feedback provided after classroom observations were very helpful. Throughout, teacher responses suggested that critical-dialogic strategies and protocols were well-suited for fifth graders. Observations and reports from teachers indicated students engaged productively across group sizes and logistical arrangements (e.g., Zoom, hybrid online and in-person, in-person) and were able to reflect, with many expressing excitement about the opportunity to engage with classmates through dialogue protocols.

Exploratory Qualitative Analysis (R3): Consensual qualitative analysis revealed three major themes:

- A. "Gobsmacked" by Weight — A pervasive theme from interviews with educators was their surprise, increased awareness, and/or notable personal reflection about the effects of weight bias. Participants discussed profound insights into the role of weight bias in their own lives and in classroom or school grounds.
- B. Critical Dialogue as a Powerful Tool for Equity Promotion — Participants reported finding the critical-dialogic approach useful with students, in professional development settings, and as part of critical self-reflection. Teachers suggested the structure seemed "freeing" for them and students, noting how it fostered practice listening instead of preparing a rebuttal or moral lesson, with one White teacher feeling more able to take risks in the dialogue and confront difficult matters of identity and bias with students.
- C. Teacher as More than Formal Instructor — Teachers expressed having an expanded awareness about how societal expectations and challenging current events could affect the wellbeing of students. Several participants were more self-reflective about their beliefs, especially around weight, to be appropriate models for students and others. Student disclosures in the teacher-facilitated dialogues had greater depth than expected. For example, many participants noted

that fifth graders are thinking critically about social issues and identity in ways they did not expect.

Implications of findings for MMSD policy or practice and future research:

- Our study highlighted dialogue as an accessible way for educators to interrogate their thoughts, experiences, and biases related to race and weight. Many participants voiced great appreciation for the welcoming, open, non-hierarchical structure of the intervention. It may be more engaging and more effective for educators to engage in reflective, critical-dialogic professional development approaches, especially in trainings about systemic injustices or implicit biases.
- Weight stigma represents a significant oversight in extant education research and practice. Academics, practitioners, and trainers of school professionals need greater awareness of systemic harm of weight bias and work to increase attention to it as an issue of injustice. To these aims, Campbell (2021) provides specific recommendations for a variety of roles relevant to school mental health professionals and educators (e.g., assessing implicit bias, adjusting language about bodies/weight).
- Didactic content about the mechanisms of bias (both racism and weight stigma) was well-received by both classroom teachers and building staff. Strategies taught in our intervention are not specific to the classroom setting, but can be used in all areas of the school building.
- Teachers expressed great appreciation for our attention to their facilitation of dialogues and to the ways students responded to their methods, particularly praising the detailed feedback provided by observing researchers. This suggests that educators benefit from feedback beyond academic instruction, including those that impact school climate and student belonging, especially for students who have minoritized identities.