ABSTRACT

Although there is growing global interest in health awareness, and emergence of scales to measure health literacy, there is less effort in empirical research in ascertaining the level of body literacy of different groups of individuals in determining how much information and understanding individuals have about their bodies. The academia may be successful in enhancing cognitive and psychomotor skills of students, but how have these enhanced students’ knowledge to issues concerning their bodies and health such as blood pressure, blood sugar, genotype, body mass index, feeding habit, etc., and the decisions/actions they make/take regarding these, and the implications of these to being embodied learners? This study sampled 120 participants to investigate the body literacy level of postgraduate and undergraduate students of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria, their level of awareness to risk, and their challenges of being bodily literate through a self-developed questionnaire which translated into a 21-item body literacy measurement scale.

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge and understanding of our own bodies as well as the primary experience of our bodies matter. This is because the body, as a fundamental source of knowledge, comprehends issues before our heads fully understand what is at stake (Clark, 2005; Mejiuni & Women Against Rape, Sexual Harassment and Sexual Exploitation, 2012). Having understanding and respect for our bodies help us have an open and compassionate perspective on life such that we become attuned to how our physical experiences affect
the choices we make in relation to ourselves, to our fellow human being and our environment (Bond, 2011). The body can provide important insights into how students relate to their learning context and how educators can effectively design learning to engage diverse learners (Yoo & Loch, 2016).

Bodily knowing is free from the interference of the mind’s filtering process and acts as the source of all other forms of knowing, as logical reasoning and conceptualisations are derived from our bodily experiences (Campbell, 2009; Steinhaug & Malterud, 2008; Palmer, 1998). Lakoff and Johnson (1999) also conclude that “our sense of what is real begins with and depends crucially on our bodies” (p. 17). When we observe embodied practice, we realize that we come to know through the body as our experience and subsequent emotions are interpreted through the body (Matthews, 1998; Michelson, 1998).

Today, the increase in health, beauty and fitness industries has increased attention given to the body, body literacy and embodied learning, as evident in the advertising slogan ‘look good, feel good’ (Coffey, 2012, p. 4, as cited in Featherstone, 2010 & Crawford, 2006). Ishikawa and Kiuchi (2010) provided the World Health Organisation’s definition of health literacy as “the cognitive and social skills which determine the motivation and ability of individuals to gain access to, understand, and use information in ways which promote and maintain good health” (p. 2). Body literacy fits within this definition because our bodies exist within sociopolitical and environmental contexts. It is the self-knowledge gained by a woman’s learning to observe and chart the cyclic signs of fertility and infertility, together with other health and wellness observations (ASHOKA, 2007, as cited in Mejiuni et al., 2012).

However, body literacy must be understood beyond specificity to women, and their reproductive concerns. Since health is generally seen as a set of ideas that has connections with one’s responsibility, or as a feeling, identity and the experience of the self, body literacy cannot be detached from the learning processes (experiential learning and self-awareness) that is involved in understanding one’s health and identity. This connection of understanding one’s health and one’s identity feeds into one’s engagement with embodied learning. In this sense, experiential learning and self-awareness become key connecting processes with which we situate body literacy within embodied learning, which itself is a process of recognising that we know with our bodies as well as our minds, to reclaim our wholeness as learners and that the body is the site of learning for what is most true, and authentic for us as individuals. It is the domain of intuition, a kind of gut knowing, and is manifested in decisions, big and small (Clark, 2005; Mejiuni et al., 2012).

According to Rathunde (2009), embodied learning is one that is in tune with the intimate connection of the body and the mind. Embodiment suggests that it is through our bodily perceptions, movements, emotions, and feelings that meaning becomes possible. In other words, anything that is meaningful to us is shaped in some fashion by our incarnation as creatures of flesh. Embodiment suggests that many abstract concepts like justice are metaphorical extensions of experiential, body-based movements (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). According to Davies (1993), our literacies are characteristic of mixed messages that fill up our bodies and minds, which play a role in our negotiations of self, further literate practice, and knowledge construction. These messages lead to adult development which involves physiological, psychological, emotional, and spiritual changes and growth in every area of life. It is the view of this paper that adults, whether consciously or unconsciously, tend to take cognizance of these changes, including their awareness of the functioning of their body systems, and bodily descriptions such as height, weight, blood group, genotype, complexion (skin colour), HIV/AIDS status, allergies, etc. This helps them in developing self-confidence and to practice good health habits, and gain a positive value, and image of who they really are (their identities). Much of existing knowledge on body literacy has been limited to the concept of reproductive health of women. There is need to expand the knowledge and understanding