

HEALTH PROMOTING SCHOOLS

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The concept of Health Promoting Schools arose in response to the realisation to the need to look at public health at an even earlier developmental stage of the health problem. Instead of solving public health problems as they surface, the new approach would seek to address issues leading to the said problems. The priority, therefore, is now placed on the promotion of health leading towards disease prevention.

This view was supported by the World Health Organization (WHO) Western Pacific Region report entitled "New Horizon in Health" which outlined ways of structuring plans and programmes pursuing "Health for All by the Year 2000." This document identified three themes for future work, namely preparation for life, protection for life and quality for life in later years. Health promoting schools are based on the first of the three themes, preparation for life, focusing on health promotion issues particularly relevant to infancy, childhood and youth. Schools are given priority in the regional health promotion programme endorsed by Member States in 1993.

Twenty-seven countries responded to a proposal for the development of health-promoting schools. In 1995, eight countries were actively involved. They were China, Malaysia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Papua New Guinea, Republic of Korea, Singapore, Vietnam and the Solomon Islands.

The six major elements that form the basis of a health promoting school are school health policy, the physical environment, the social environment, community relationships, personal health skills and health services.

It is also understood that the development of health promoting schools calls for building alliances. The Department of Health must collaborate with the Department of Education at the country level; and within WHO, an interdivisional theme group on preparation for life ensures that all relevant activities such as tobacco, HIV/AIDS and nutrition are considered. WHO also collaborates with UNESCO, UNICEF, UNFPA and the South Pacific Commission and Education International in developing health promoting schools.

The Goal

A health promoting school is characterised by it constantly strengthening its capacity as a healthy setting for living, learning and working. The main concerns of a health promoting school include:

- Engaging health and education officers, teachers, students, parents and community leaders in efforts to make the school a healthy place.
- Implementing policies, practices and measures that encourage self-esteem, provide multiple opportunities for success and acknowledge good efforts and intentions as well as personal achievement.
- Striving to provide a healthy environment, school health education and school health services along with school/community health projects

and outreach, health promotion programmes for staff, programmes for counselling, social support and mental health promotion etc.

- Striving to improve the health of school personnel, families, community members as well as pupils, and working with community leaders to help them understand how the community contributes to health and education.

WHO in 1995, convened on an Expert Committee on Comprehensive School Health Education and Promotion (World Health 1996) to assess what is known about health through schools. The committee reviewed research from both developing and developed countries and concluded that school health programmes can simultaneously decrease common health problems, increase efficiency of the education system and thus advance public health, education and social and economic development in all nations. The Expert Committee also recommended 10 steps to help schools become "Health Promoting Schools". The 10 steps are as follows :-

1. Schools provide an entry point for health promotion and intervention
2. Health education taught in schools must be skilled based
3. Schools must provide safe learning and working environment
4. Full educational participation of girls must be encouraged
5. Investment in schooling must be a major concern for every Member State
6. International support required in the early stages
7. Successful school health programmes must be in place
8. Community and school interaction to support health and education
9. Provide training of teachers and school staff
10. Policies, legislation and guidelines must be developed to ensure the mobilisation, allocation and co-ordination of resources at all levels.

Health promoting schools is a setting-based approach of promoting health to a number of groups (pupils, their families, staff and the community) on a variety of topics (nutrition, obesity, sexual health, accidents, environmental issues etc.) using a variety of methodologies (campaigns, health education, community development etc.). The concept is an excellent strategy to achieve one of the main objectives of WHO, that is, "Health for All by the Year 2000."

Another important point is that schooling in itself is shown to be a powerful way to influence health everywhere. This can be clearly demonstrated from the benefits of Maternal and Child Health (Editorial, World Health 1996). Educated women tend to marry later and more likely to utilise the family planning services. They make informed decisions regarding health matters through health education, take better care of their children and family as a whole and are more likely to have their children immunised against infectious dis-

eases.

Health promoting schools also provide opportunities for nations to deal with the common public health issues. This is particularly useful for developing countries where resources are scarce.

Discussions

Promoting the health of the young is a good investment for any nation. The reason is simply that these young people will determine the health and economy of the nation in future years. If the nation is committed to nurture all aspects of health - physical, mental and social, of these young people, they will grow up to be well rounded individuals and thus will contribute to the prosperity of the nation (World Health 1996). The key issue here is to make every effort to promote health at a very young age so that healthy behaviour may be inculcated earlier on in life and stays throughout middle and old ages.

Young people learn not only from teachers in school, but from their families and the communities at large. Therefore, it is important to provide health education to the family and the community so that there is constant reinforcements and similar values picked up by the young people in the home and community settings. However, the concept of health is not as simple as that, as there are many determinants of health such as cultural values, environment, social aspect, genetic endowment to name a few. With these in mind, the health interventions planned must be able to harmonise with these determinants of health in order to achieve effectiveness.

The checklist of Health Promotion Principles (Phil Hanlon, Outline Notes on Health Promotion) can be applied to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the concept of Health Promoting Schools.

Most of the examples in the literature illustrate that the concept is based on a broad definition of health, that is, it covers the physical, mental and social aspect of health. However most of the time, it concentrates more on the positive component of these aspects of health. Most of the examples also show that the determinants of health have been well analysed. Health for all principles were applied in most of the programmes and the concept of Health Promoting school is to teach life skills and works on the theme of preparation for life and therefore the process is empowering.

Health Promoting Schools use a combination methodology of education, prevention and advocacy. However, in most instances the main emphasis is on education. This would be enhanced by considering the multiple approaches to promoting health. When we consider the models of education, the two more relevant ones would be Health Action Models and Stages of Change.

Most of the examples indicate that a comprehensive needs assessment was done and in a few cases a community diagnosis was performed. In some instances, planning was good. However, this could be further improved if all

poles of the health compass were explored. Evaluation can be done on a short or long term basis. Most of the examples quoted an improvement in the overall health of the pupils and the community. An improvement in the school environment also resulted. However, most of the time, it fails to discuss the benefits achieved by the schools' staff. More emphasis such as training and incentives

should be given to this group of people in the school setting too. In the long term, an evaluation on the overall morbidity and mortality rates in the countries can be done and the country's economy would portray the investment put in promoting health of the pupils, staff and the community at large using a school setting.

It can be concluded that

Health Promoting Schools offer a strategy in visualising WHO's "Health for All by the Year 2000" by working on the theme of preparation for life. It also offers a way of dealing with the Nation's public health issues and investing in the health of the young people will certainly enrich the Nations' future economy which will again reinforce the health of the population.