

Deciding on Values

Basing the health-promoting school on clear principles and values

In the past it has been assumed that promoting health is an obvious activity, but we are now realizing that it is more complex than that, and cannot be 'value free'. In fact the act of saying that the promotion of health is important is in itself a value statement. We need to decide from the outset the principles on which we wish to base our work, and decisions about this are connected with values, morals and political judgments.

There has been much discussion of what principles should underpin the health-promoting school approach. For example, at an International Conference in Thessaloniki-Halkidiki, in Greece in 1997, (ENHPS, 1997) a conference resolution was drawn up, which reflected the views of a wide range of professionals from 43 countries. It urged governments to create the conditions for 10 principles or values to be put into practice to support the ENHPS. These principles were

- Democratic practices and participation
- Equity and access
- Empowerment and action competence
- Sustainability
- Curriculum based health promotion
- Provision of teacher training
- The school environment
- Collaboration and partnership
- Involving communities
- Measuring success

Four of these are more fully explained in the table below. The others are explored in more detail in later sections.

Values underpinning a health-promoting school approach
<p>Democratic practices and participation</p> <p>Health promotion is defined by the Ottawa Charter (WHO, 1986) as <i>'the process of enabling people to increase control over, and to improve, their own health'</i>. It aims to ensure that an action or process is done with, rather than to, people. The principle of democracy is important in education as well as in health, as the overall purpose of education in many countries is to educate pupils to participate actively in their society. A key strategy for a health-promoting school is to ensure that its organization, the way decisions are made, the management structures and ethos are all democratic, empowering and encourage genuine participation by pupils, staff and parents. Key elements include consultation of staff and pupils and open communication. The task of a teacher is to enable and facilitate pupils to help themselves, rather than determine the process for them.</p> <p>Pupils' parliaments, parents' councils, and school planning groups that include members of the local community are just some of the ways in which democratic intentions can become reality.</p>

Equity and access

The principle of equity should be enshrined within the educational experience. This guarantees that everyone in a school is free from oppression, fear and ridicule. The health-promoting school is genuinely socially inclusive and provides equal access for all to the full range of educational opportunities. Everyone needs to benefit from school, not only academic achievers, but also children, with special needs and those from all ethnic groups. The aim of the health-promoting school is to foster the emotional and social development of every individual, enabling each to attain his or her full potential free from discrimination. For this, each person needs to feel that they belong, feel cared for, valued and safe.

Empowerment and action competence

The health-promoting school improves young people's abilities to take action and generate change. It provides a setting within which they, working together with their teachers and others, can gain a sense of achievement. The goal of empowerment is autonomy, by which is meant self determination and control of one's own work and life, thinking for oneself and being critical and independent, while being able to take full responsibility for the effects of one's own actions.

Young people's empowerment, linked to their visions and ideas, enables them to influence their lives and living conditions. This is achieved through quality educational policies and practices, which provide opportunities for participation in critical decision-making.

Autonomy is a vital issue for teachers as well as pupils. The degree to which teachers have control over their own work, and can make their own decisions has been shown to be fundamental to their emotional and social health and to their performance in general. (Moos, 1991; Shaw and Riskind, 1983;) Higher levels of staff autonomy have a wide range of benefits, including decreased stress levels, lower absenteeism and higher morale

Sustainability

Any initiative planned must be sustainable, long-term and adequately resourced. It needs to be embedded in the on-going educational process.

The last six principles are covered in more detail in the following sections of this resource.

Activity: deciding on values for your school

Schools have implicit or explicit values that influence daily school activities and classroom teaching. It is important to discuss:

What values are important currently in your school?

Are there other values which you would like to see given priority in a health policy?

How would this fit in with the current ethos of the school?

How would this fit in with the current values of society?

How would people know that these values are important?