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Title: Health promoting schools: Identifying and addressing health issues in New Zealand schools

Authors: Penni Cushman* - Senior Lecturer, University of Canterbury, College of Education, Christchurch, New Zealand (Penni.Cushman@canterbury.ac.nz)
Tracy Clelland* - Lecturer, University of Canterbury, College of Education, Christchurch, New Zealand (Tracy.Clelland@canterbury.ac.nz)

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Abstract: There is a developing international understanding of the interlinked relationship between education and health. The concept of 'Health Promoting Schools' (HPS) - schools that promote the health and wellbeing of their students and in doing so enhance the learning outcomes of students has received global recognition, and is an integral aspect of school life in a number of countries such as Scandinavia, Canada, and Scotland. Research clearly shows a link between HPS schools and improved academic outcomes (Patton et al., 2000; St.Leger et al., 2007).

The extent to which the concept of HPS is recognised and implemented in New Zealand has not, to date, been formally investigated. This is despite the Ministry of Health stating that HPS is one method of enabling schools and communities to identify and address health issues in an educational setting. Health issues impact on students' abilities to learn and in doing so constitute major barriers to learning for many students.

The aim of this research was to survey a randomly selected sample (1000) of New Zealand schools to determine the health issues that impact on learning, the strategies that the schools have implemented to address the health issues, and the schools’ understanding of the concept of HPS. The postal survey was sent to schools with a return post envelope and utilised a mixed methodology. This allowed the researchers to acquire quantitative data that could be further explored through the use of the qualitative narratives.

The data was collated using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The quantitative data was coded and then analyzed in SPSS. The qualitative data which consisted of rich narratives was coded using thematic analysis.

The results identified an extensive range of health issues that impact on student learning. Particularly, food choices, lack of food and mental health issues such as bullying, relating to others, anxiety, abuse and family trauma. An extensive range of strategies were identified to address health issues with a clear identification of the benefits of utilising elements of the 'health promoting schools' approach. The results lend further support to the importance of funding for the national implementation of the 'health promoting schools' framework. Supporting teachers, schools and their communities is crucial in addressing health issues that are barriers to learning.

Health promoting schools, educational outcomes, mental health, food choices, barriers to learning.

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