

HEALTH PROMOTING SCHOOLS AS SEEN FROM A UNIVERSITY STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

Rudolf KOHOUTEK

Abstract: *In April 2007, a number of first-year students at the Faculty of Education in Brno were asked to share their views of the positive and negative aspects of schools, with regard to physical and mental health factors and social conditions. Their opinions were based on their own experience with the school environment.*

The study used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods and included 115 students (107 women and 8 men) chosen at random from the body of first-year students at the Faculty of Education MU in Brno. Most of the opinions elicited – whether positive or negative in relation to a possible impact on the students' health – focused on the school environment (that is, the equipment, facilities, organization and social environment). A number of opinions dealt with teaching methods, but very few respondents mentioned the issue of open partnership (for example, the school's active participation in the life of the local community). Some of the positive and negative points mentioned provide a valuable contribution to the current WHO and EU standards regarding the Health Promoting Schools Programme assessment criteria.

Keywords: *healthy school, Health Promoting Schools Programme, research methods, positive and negative aspects of school environment, learning/teaching, open partnership, evaluation criteria*

The 'healthy school' concept

In our research, this abbreviated concept refers to the *Health Promoting Schools Programme*. After 1989, this program has come to signify, for both Czech and European schools, a common plan for a gradual change in school curricula, education systems and general pedagogy, to go hand in hand with new perspectives of social and cultural development.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has adopted a complex plan called 'Health 21', with a view to improving health standards in European countries within the first two decades of the century. Subsequently, the key principle of the *Health Promot-*

ing Schools Programme is establishing a *holistic approach to health* in the context of school education and all related activities.

The holistic (interactional) philosophy of health considers the interaction between all the different components of an individual's health and between one's health and the health of the community, the society, the world and nature.

The major aim for all the pedagogues included in the Health Promoting Schools Programme is to influence the formal aspects of school life (the formal curriculum, culture and school ethos), as well as the spontaneous, functional ones (the contextual curriculum, culture and school ethos) in order to create a positive impact on the pupils' health. Together with that, one of the major goals of health-promoting schools is creating a *positive social climate*.

The Health Promoting Schools Programme was developed and first implemented in Scotland in 1986. In 1989, it was adopted for other European countries by WHO and in 1991, it was offered to Central European countries. In 1992, it was introduced into the Czech context. The guarantor for the Czech Republic is The National Institute of Public Health (NIPH) and the partner is Healthy Cities of the Czech Republic (HCCZ). The European guarantors of the program are WHO (The World Health Organization), CEU (Central European University) and CE (Council of Europe). The national coordinator for the Health Promoting Schools Programme is M. Havlínová.

The program was started with an action plan in three stages, with a view to promoting health at Czech schools.

The first stage – the so-called *pilot stag'* – took place between 1992 and 1999. The studies carried out at that period showed that the social climate at health-promoting schools is statistically more favorable, when measured against the check sample of schools.

At the moment, the *strategic* stage is under way (planned for the period between 2000 and 2007), to be followed by the *integrative* stage (2008–2015).

The major *aim* of the program lies in promoting a sense of respect towards and responsibility for one's health as well as other people's health from an early school age, and turning these attitudes into lifetime priorities. For a health-promoting school, the main *integrative principles* of action are creating respect for the particular needs of the individual and developing communication and cooperation.

Our study focuses on three *main principles* (pillars) of the Health Promoting Schools Programme – a favorable *learning environment* (including the material, social and organizational aspects), *healthy teaching/learning* and the so-called *open partnership*.

Research aims

In 2007, we carried out research amongst 115 first-year students at the Faculty of Education in Brno. The subjects were chosen at random, with the sample consisting of 107 female students (93 %) and 8 male students (7 %). The respondents were asked to comment on the positive and negative aspects of all the schools they had attended so

far, with respect to a potential impact on their health. Health was not defined merely as an absence of illness; in a much broader definition, it was described as physical well-being, peace of mind and living in a favorable social climate. The written answers were sometimes complemented using interviews.

This particular paper reports primarily on the positive and negative aspects of elementary schools; kindergartens and secondary schools will be dealt with in a future paper. In brief summary, most respondents who went to kindergarten focused their positive feedback or criticism on the personality of the teacher. Surprisingly enough, a number of students felt very negative about the regular afternoon siestas and keeping quiet (which was an almost traumatizing experience). Also, quite a lot of the respondents criticized being forced to finish all the meals and drinks, even the ones they found utterly disgusting (for instance, finishing a cup of hot milk including the film on top).

Results of qualitative and quantitative analyses

As far as well-being in the school environment is concerned, it may be divided into three components – comfort of physical environment, safety of social environment and organizational well-being. First of all, we are going to deal with the comfort of *physical environment*. So far, the official Health Promoting Schools Programme assessment criteria included the following:

A hygienic environment

General safety

Useful and functional equipment/facilities

An inspiring/motivating environment

A cozy and tastefully decorated environment

Accessibility of the school premises (to move around and use)

Personal space (to store personal belongings)

When asked about physical environment, 62 % of the respondents (71 students) gave us positive feedback (145 positive comments altogether). Thirty-eight per cent of the respondents (44 students) did not mention any positive points.

Following are the positive aspects mentioned in relation to physical environment:

- spacious internal arrangement of the school (24 % of the students, 28 positive comments)
- well-equipped classrooms (17 % of the students, 20 positive comments)
- good teaching aids (16 % of the students, 19 positive comments)
- internal decoration (15 % of the students, 17 positive comments)
- clean classrooms and facilities (13 % of the students, 15 positive comments)
- sports centers (11 % of the students, 13 positive comments)
- spacious and well-equipped gyms (9 % of the students, 10 positive comments)
- playgrounds and swimming-pools (8 % of the students, 9 positive comments)

- spacious and well-organized cafeterias and clean toilets (7 % of the students, 8 positive comments)
- the school building from the outside (its condition and overall appearance) (5 % of the students, 6 positive comments)

In contrast, 60 % of the students (68 respondents) mentioned 121 negative aspects in relation to physical environment:

- not enough room in the classrooms (26 % of the students, 31 negative comments)
- poor classroom equipment (25 % of the students, 29 negative comments)
- small and poorly equipped gyms (18 % of the students, 21 negative comments)
- common cloakrooms for boys and girls (10 % of the students, 12 negative comments)
- cloakrooms too small (9 % of the students, 11 negative comments)
- too few computers (8 % of the students, 9 negative comments)
- not enough teaching aids (7 % of the students, 8 negative comments)

Forty per cent of the students (47 respondents) did not mention any negative aspects.

Furthermore, the students supplemented the existing evaluation standards with the following qualitative criteria:

- *school equipped with copying facilities and an internet connection*
- *vending machines for drinks and dairy products on the premises*
- *exhibitions showing the pupils' work*
- *reasonably spacious lockers for pupils to store their personal belongings*

As far as safety of *social environment* is concerned, the following are listed amongst the official evaluation criteria:

Developing humanistic attitudes as components of education and personal development of both pupils and teachers

Mutual respect, trust and tolerance

Positive feedback, participation, empathy

Openness and an outgoing attitude

Readiness for assistance and cooperation

A full 80 % of the respondents (151 comments) supplied positive feedback in the issue of social environment; 20 % of the students (23 respondents) did not give any positive feedback.

Following are the positive aspects mentioned in relation to social environment:

- the teachers' personalities (53 % of the students, 61 positive comments);
- the teachers' communication style (36 % of the students, 42 positive comments);

- friendly relationships between pupils (34 % of the students, 39 positive comments);
- opportunity to express one’s point of view in class (8 % of the students, 9 positive comments).

Thirty-six percent of the respondents (41 students) did not complain about social environment. However, 64 % of the respondents (74 students) made 88 negative comments about the social climate at school. Following are the negative aspects mentioned in relation to social environment:

- unsatisfactory communication with teachers and other school employees (janitors, cooks, cleaning personnel) (39 % of the students, 45 negative comments);
- bias, favoring certain pupils over others, irony, disdain and bullying (19 % of the students, 22 negative comments);
- nervousness and stress (10 % of the students, 11 negative comments);
- shouting (9 % of the students, 10 negative comments).

Furthermore, the students supplemented the existing evaluation standards with the following qualitative criteria:

- *developing positive and cooperative communication between pupils and teachers;*
- *a chance to defend oneself against unfair treatment (with the management of the school, for instance);*
- *a letterbox where pupils could put anonymous comments about the functioning of the school and its shortcomings;*
- *developing a positive atmosphere in the classroom as well as in the whole school.*

As far as *organizational well-being* is concerned, the following are listed amongst the official evaluation criteria:

- A timetable that respects the pupils’ biorhythm**
- A timetable that is in line with the pupils’ physical and mental needs**
- Respect for the pupils’ free time**
- A healthy diet**
- A holistic approach to sports and other physical activities**

Seventy-seven per cent of the respondents (88 students) made a total of 180 positive comments about the organizational well-being of the school:

- school activities (57 % of the students, 64 positive comments);
- extra-curricular activities (cultural and sports activities) (37 % of the students, 43 positive comments);
- trips both in their country and abroad (28 % of the students, 32 positive comments);

- the organization of various clubs and courses (22 % of the students, 25 positive comments);
- boarding management (14 % of the students, 16 positive comments).

Twenty-seven respondents (23 %) did not mention any positive organizational aspects.

Forty-six students (40 %) did not make any complaints; however, 69 students (60 %) made a total of 75 negative comments related to organizational well-being:

- school canteen lunches (27 % of the students, 31 negative comments);
- repetitiveness of PE lessons (the same games all the time) (13 % of the students, 15 negative comments);
- too much homework (10 % of the students, 12 negative comments);
- lessons often cancelled (8 % of the students, 9 negative comments);
- lesson length and breaks not respected (7 % of the students, 8 negative comments).

Furthermore, the students offered to supplement the existing evaluation standards with the following qualitative criteria:

- *respecting lesson length;*
- *respecting length of breaks;*
- *lunch to be both cooked and eaten on the school premises;*
- *facilities to make hot drinks available at any time (electric kettles provided for students);*
- *respecting healthy drinking habits;*
- *sports facilities available at the school;*
- *regular trips, excursions and cultural activities.*

The second pillar of the Health Promoting Schools Programme is *healthy learning/teaching*. It consists of four major parts:

- Relevance**
- Possibility of choice and appropriateness**
- Participation and cooperation**
- Motivating evaluation**

Forty-one respondents (36 %) did not voice any complaints about healthy teaching/learning.

However, 74 students (64 %) mentioned some negative aspects (112 altogether) related to this issue, the following in particular:

- poor second language teaching (English in particular) (32 % of the students, 37 negative comments);

- little relevance of the teaching matter, lack of practical application (24 % of the students, 28 negative comments);
- boring, uninteresting methodology that did not provide them with motivation (9 % of the students, 11 negative comments);
- lack of cooperative learning (8 % of the students, 9 negative comments);
- memorizing prevailed over other learning techniques (4 % of the students, 5 negative comments).

Let us now have a closer look at each of the four components of healthy teaching/learning.

Relevance

- Authenticity in learning**
- Methodology that brings learning close to life**
- Experiential learning (hands-on-experience learning)**
- Logically connected thematic blocks**
- Using teaching resources in the school surroundings**

The respondents offered to complement this component of healthy learning/teaching as follows:

- *cooperation with advisory centers (mainly in the issues of pedagogical psychology and special pedagogy)*

Possibility of choice and appropriateness

- Opportunity to organize certain parts of the curriculum autonomously, either on the individual or group level**
- Optional subjects**
- Opportunity to choose teaching style/methods**
- Teaching/learning appropriate to the pupils' age and their individual capabilities**
- Attention and support to gifted pupils**
- Support for pupils with special needs and/or learning difficulties**
- The rational, emotional and social components of teaching/learning equally represented**

The respondents offered to complement this component of healthy learning/teaching as follows:

- developing individual creativity, as well as objective creativity
- biodromal teacher training
- adequate out-of-class assignments

Participation and cooperation

A friendly and democratic community spirit

Clear written ground rules

Elective student bodies that participate in the organization of school activities

Participation form of management – teachers cooperate on school management

Openness towards different forms of partnerships – with parents, municipalities, sponsors

Communication as a prerequisite for cooperation

Cooperative learning

The respondents offered to complement this component of healthy learning/teaching as follows:

- *partnership with other organizations (such as BESIP – Czech Road Safety Organization)*
- *cooperation with parents (also see the ‘open partnership’ section)*

Motivating evaluation

Mutual respect between pupils and teachers

Evaluation by means of relevant feedback (especially in the course of the lessons)

Verbal evaluation

The respondents offered to complement this component of healthy learning/teaching as follows:

- evaluation that takes into account individual needs and possibilities
- verbal evaluation void of irony and verbal aggression
- developing healthy self-confidence and self-regulating skills
- striving for the pupils’ complex personal development

The third pillar of the Health Promoting Schools Programme is *open partnership*. It consists of two major parts:

The school as a democratic community

The school as a cultural and educational center of the local community

This area was addressed negatively only by 17 % of the respondents (19 students, 29 comments); 96 students (83 %) did not voice any complaints. The negative aspects mentioned were as follows:

- few contacts and exchange projects in cooperation with twin schools abroad (10 % of the students, 11 negative comments);
- few contacts and exchange projects in cooperation with twin schools both here and abroad (7 % of the students, 8 negative comments);

- favoring pupils whose parents worked with the local authorities (4 % of the students, 5 negative comments);
- non-democratic groups in classrooms, little cooperation between them (2 % of the students, 2 negative comments);
- insufficient cooperation with local institutions and authorities (2 % of the students, 2 negative comments);
- Parent Association not established (2 % of the students, 2 negative comments).

The school as a democratic community

A democratic community Respect for the individual Participation Teamwork

Here, the respondents offered to complement the criteria with the following:

- *creating a Parent Association at the school;*
- *giving the parents opportunity to participate in classroom observations;*
- *enabling the parents to influence catering management at the school;*
- *extending the scope of possibilities to study abroad;*
- *students' board at the school as well as in individual classes (the students' board, the students' parliament);*
- *a letterbox for anonymous comments on the school premises;*
- *publication of a school bulletin (at least in the form of a bulletin board).*

The school as a cultural and educational center of the local community

Here, the respondents offered to complement the criteria with the following:

- *the school takes active part in the various activities taking place in the town, district and region;*
- *the school actively cooperates with libraries and sports organizations;*
- *the school organizes regular balls and other cultural activities;*
- *the school actively cooperates with kindergartens;*
- *the school actively cooperates with other Health Promoting schools.*

Our research into the positive and negative aspects of secondary school education yielded similar results; it is only higher education that requires a separate analysis.

Conclusion

Our research focused on the concept of Health Promoting Schools, taking a psychological perspective and addressing 115 first-year students at the Faculty of Education MU in Brno, eliciting opinions about the relationship between education and health.

Subsequent data analysis showed that most positive or negative comments were related to the *school environment* (including its physical, social and organizational aspects). A number of comments focused on *teaching/learning*, but very few responses were related to the issue of *open partnership* (e.g. the school's active participation in the life of the local community).

Some of the students' complementing criteria for evaluation of schools provide a vital contribution to the current WHO and EU evaluation standards for the Health Promoting Schools Programme.

We believe that gathering data about students'/pupils' views and experience of the functioning of different types of schools (kindergartens, elementary schools, secondary schools and institutions of higher education) might prove extremely useful, not only in providing suggestions for improvement at particular institutions, but also in inspiring general health-promoting changes, thus improving pupils' physical, mental and social well-being.

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ZDRAVÁ ŠKOLA ZORNÝM ÚHLEM STUDENTŮ PEDAGOGICKÉ FAKULTY MU

Souhrn: Studenti prvního ročníku Pedagogické fakulty MU byli v dubnu 2007 požádáni, aby na základě kvalitativně-quantitativní posuzovací škály vyjádřili svůj názor na klady a zápory základní školy, které považovali za důležité ve vztahu k jejich zdraví (tělesné, duševní a sociální pohodě), a to na základě vlastní zkušenosti ze základní školy.

Výzkumu se zúčastnilo 115 náhodně vybraných studentů a studentek (107 žen a 8 mužů) prvního ročníku Pedagogické fakulty Masarykovy univerzity v Brně.

Nejvíce uvedených názorů studentů (ať již kladných nebo záporných z hlediska možného ovlivnění jejich zdraví) se týkalo prostředí školy (věcného, tj. materiál-ně-technického, sociálního a organizačního). Řada názorů se týkala způsobu vyučování a minimum názorů tzv. otevřeného partnerství (např. aktivní spoluúčasti školy na životě obce).

Některé klady a zápory uvedené studenty znamenají obohacení dosud uvádě-ných kritérií WHO a EU pro hodnocení Školy podporující zdraví.

Klíčová slova: zdravá škola, metody poznávání školy, zápory a klady prostředí školy, vyučování ve škole, otevřené partnerství, kritéria hodnocení školy