

HEALTH EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS IN AUSTRIA - EMBODIMENT IN THE CURRICULA AND CURRENT INITIATIVES

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Abstract: *The following article outlines – based on recent studies on the health status of Austrian children and young people – some results from the field of nicotine and alcohol consumption as well as obesity. Recent studies also point to the relatively new problem of bullying in Austrian schools. First initiatives in health education – dating back to the 1980s – primarily aimed at nutrition consciousness and healthy exercises; nowadays more campaigns aim at consumption (abuse) of tobacco and alcohol and more recently on the phenomenon of „bullying”. The so-called life and health skills are increasingly reflected in projects and campaigns.*

Keywords: *health education, teaching principle, current studies on the health of children and adolescents, consumption of nicotine and alcohol, obesity, bullying, projects and campaigns, life and health skills*

1 „Children’s and adolescents’ health on alert ...”

...could be read in the Austrian daily newspaper „Der Standard” on 29 January 2010. „In a ranking presented by the OECD on the health status of children and adolescents Austria is among 30 states only at number 27; the UN children’s agency UNICEF ranked Austria 14th among 21 states. ...As far as smoking is concerned young Austrians (27 percent of the 15-year-olds smoke cigarettes regularly) are top – just as in alcohol consumption: Nearly 40 percent were drunk at least twice in life. According to OECD data the percentage of obese boys has doubled within four years, which sets up a record. The suicide rates among young people are higher than average” (Der Standard, 29 Jan. 2010).

One third of the 15-year-old girls and about half of the 15-year-old boys have already experienced drunkenness several times; seven per cent of the eleven-year-olds drink alcohol once a week (according to the Anton Proksch Institute, treatment center for alcohol, drugs and drug addiction). As to smoking the Austrians are early adopters as well: the proportion of regular smokers among the 15-year-olds is more than one third above the European average (27 %).

Obesity is increasingly becoming a problem: too much fat, sugar ... and too little exercise. Several studies carried out in the Austrian federal provinces show similar results: According to an HBSC study (Linz 2007) six percent of the Upper Austrian 11-year-olds admit to have consumed so much alcohol at least once that they were drunk. For the 13-year-olds the figure is already at 15 percent and the for 15-year-olds at 58 percent. Among students of secondary modern schools, of pre-vocational and vocational schools alcohol consumption is significantly higher than among students of academic upper secondary schools. Regarding the smoking prevalence among 15-year-olds the Upper Austrians are around the national average rate: 23 percent smoke daily, another 10 percent at least once a week and 14 percent occasionally. Just over half of the 15-year-olds (53 percent) do not smoke at all (see Child and Youth Health in Upper Austria 2007, p. XIff.).

A study on the “Health of the Carinthian Children and Adolescents” – published in 2009 – showed that in the federal province of Carinthia in the age group of the 13- to 15-year-olds more than 20 percent are smokers; in the age group of the 16- to 18-year-olds the percentage suddenly increased to 60 percent. On the other hand about 50 % of the 10- to 22-year-old Carinthian children and adolescents never consume alcoholic beverages. The group of those who repeatedly drink alcohol weekly or daily increases from the age 16 to 22 of around 6 percent to 13 percent. Significantly more boys than girls (9 per cent resp. 2 per cent) find themselves in this group.

Another problem is obesity: in Carinthia 17 % of the ten- to 15-year-old boys and 19 % of the girls are overweight and 5 % resp. 6 % suffer from obesity (see Health of the Carinthian children and adolescents, 2009, p. 19ff.). New aspects, which occur more and more often in recent studies are “bullying and harassment”. Direct consequences of such a constant threat of violence (physical and/or mental) lead to stress and concentration problems, to increased anxiety and irritability, to psychosomatic problems, deterioration in the pupils’ work – up to school avoidance and school phobia... The Carinthian study reported 30 percent of the pupils and students between 10 and 15 years who were involved as victims, perpetrators or both in bullying in the last six months, 10 percent of them were victims (see the health of children and Carinthian adolescents, 2009, p. 23).

Therefore prevention and health education in the broadest sense is getting more and more important in Austrian schools. Measures for health education have been taken for more than a quarter of a century in Austrian schools. – At the beginning “healthy diet” and “healthy exercises” were in the center of the efforts, today there’s a change in trend towards nicotine and alcohol prevention; bullying has recently become an issue.

2 From the making of the concept of „Health Promoting Schools“ to the Decree

In the late 1980s the concept of the „Health Promoting School” developed – associated with a reorientation of the health policy of the World Health Organisation – the „Ottawa Charter” of 1986.

Starting point was the Ottawa Charter for health promotion, which was adopted in 1986.

The program: “Health Promoting School” was tested in pilot schools in interna-

tional networks of the World Health Organisation (WHO), of the Council of Europe and in networks of the European Union (EU) in the years 1993-96.

The experience gained led to the adoption of a decree, which describes the tasks, objectives and principles of health promotion in schools as well as their implementation (GZ 27.909/15-V/3/96 of 4 March 1994, Circular No. 7/1997).

This decree defines the following basic objectives:

- Shaping the school as a health promoting living space, including all persons involved in school life;
- Promotion of personal skills and capacities of the students in terms of health-conscious, independent acting and knowledge;
- Networking between schools and the regional environment;
- Promotion of communicative and cooperative skills of teachers, parents and pupils as well as improvement of communication structures between teachers, students and parents;
- Documentation and dissemination of innovative projects and measures (see details at: Seebauer/Grimus, 2003, p. 234f.).

3 Health education as a principle of education – health education as a so-called „educational matter of concern”

As an educational principle health education has been embodied in the curricula of compulsory schools, vocational schools, business and commercial schools, in upper secondary schools with a focus on economics as well as in the curricula of schools for kindergarden teachers... The educational principle is not to cause an increase of subjects in the curriculum, but will help contribute to a better coordination and carefully planned selection of the material laid down in the curriculum. Additional focuses may be laid down within the framework of autonomous curricular provisions – in the form of optional subjects and electives.

As is known from international studies

- the self-confidence of students also depends on whether they feel comfortable in the school or not;
- well-being and self-confidence make a positive impact on the physical and the mental health of students (e.g. back pain and headache, morning fatigue and nervousness occur less frequently);
- health behaviour is influenced by the school, so there is a clear link between the school climate and the proportion of young people smoking at the school; there seems to be an interaction between the consumption of alcohol and the school climate.

Similarly, health and achievement run parallel: Healthier students are more successful at school. Successful students lead a healthier life. Even with teachers targeted interventions lead to improved coping strategies in terms of stress and problems and to a long-term satisfying and less stressful work situation. Against this background, nume-

rous projects and initiatives have been launched, some of which are briefly outlined in the following section.

4 Current projects and activities in austrian schools targetting at health promotion

Subsequently a number of Austria-wide activities and campaigns will be described, some of them focus on a specific topic (e.g. smoking); but in most cases, however, such activities follow a broad definition of health and try to involve more areas of life. In this context it should be referred to the “GIVE projects and materials” in particular – an initiative of of the Ministry of Education and the Health Ministry as well as the Austrian Youth Red Cross, which provide teachers with current information, material and suggestions for teaching.

Issues such as “communication and interpersonal skills” – as a prerequisite for successful relationships with other people, for a constructive approach to conflicts as well as for cooperation and teamwork get solid grounding in the same way as “self-esteem and dealing with feelings” – development of self-confidence, ability to deal with feelings, coping with stress ... (see <http://www.give.or.at/>). Communication and interpersonal skills are considered part of the health and life skills defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO) that are effective in many areas of life – e.g. communication, empathy, conflict management, cooperation and teamwork, personal commitment ...

- *The “European Network of Health Promoting Schools”*. The WHO, the Council of Europe and the EU have launched the joint project “European Network of Health Promoting Schools” even in 1992. Austria has successfully participated in this project until 2006. The international project will support activities and developments at the national level with the aim of making school a health-promoting workplace and learning environment. The project is/was based on a broader definition of health with a focus on “developing personal skills of individuals in the school and the school community in terms of health-conscious, independent acting, defining clear objectives and establishing good relationships with teachers and students, awareness of a health concept, which comprises the physical, mental and social well-being ... (see the details in Seebauer/Grimus, 2003, p. 236 f.).
- The computer program “*feelok*” is a well-founded internet program on adolescent health for 12- to 18-year-olds, developed by the University of Zurich, together with young people and professionals. The website (<http://www.feelok.at/>) offers interesting information and tips on health topics such as dealing with stress, smoking, cannabis use as well as love and sexuality.
- The project “*The smoke-free school. Democratic anti-smoking campaign*” for pupils from the fifth year of schooling ran from 10/01/2004 to 05/31/2005 (cf. <http://lbimngs-archiv.lbg.ac.at/projekte/rfs.html>). It was initiated by the fact that smoking is the most important single cause of disease and premature deaths – preventable by changing behavioural patterns.

- The campaign “*Be Smart! Don’t start – Smoke Free Class Competition*” is an initiative of the Austrian Cancer Aid, aiming at becoming a non-smoker (see <http://www.krebshilfe.net/information/rauchen/rauchen.shtml/pages/wettbewerb/index.shtml>).
- The fact sheet “*health of girls and young women*” addresses the field of “gender and health” – based on the fact that the health of women and men is different in the respective stages of life. In terms of gender mainstreaming (see SchUG [Act on organisation of schools] Nr.13/2002) it is therefore necessary to discuss health and its preconditions separately, even in terms of young people and to make health-promoting measures gender-sensitive. Two fact sheets (Nos. 2 and 3) address young men and women separately.
- The “*EU Food Safety Campaign*” provides a bridge to the consumer and to consumer education in schools. Since Austria’s accession to the European Union Austrian schools participate in the competition – annually put out to tender by the European Commission – called “Young consumers in Europe”, which address different topics. The aim of the competition to design and organize activities in which young people learn about the labeling of products. Already in the spring of 1999, 50 000 brochures “Look on the label – safety through information” were distributed. The focus of the action was on upper secondary schools. Issues such as identification, description of ingredients, origin and quality labels of goods were placed there. Furthermore, in the autumn of 1999 32.000 CD-ROMs were sent to students from 12 to 16 years, which presented the content on food safety in a playful way. In a third phase, another 40.000 school packages were distributed, building on previous experiences. The school package on “Food and Nutrition” includes the newly-designed CD-ROM “Check Your Snack” – intended for students, and an information booklet and worksheets targeting at teachers. This campaign is significant in so far as information on food and nutrition should be taught in school, because patterns once embossed can only be changed with great difficulties later.
- The campaign “*low-fat milk helps in the fight against kilos*”. For the Ministry of Education the support of the school milk (for decades already), is not an isolated measure, but part of the overall concept of health promotion in terms of healthy lifestyles. School doctors and practitioners increasingly have to face the phenomenon that the number of overweight children – amongst them also severely obese children – increases, which results in a number of secondary diseases of obesity (high blood pressure, arteriosclerosis, with all the complications and – according to the latest studies – type II diabetes) already in children and adolescents. Ten to 20 percent of Austrian children are overweight. In most cases, the total energy intake is too high – largely due to increased fat intake. Moreover, in most cases, they don’t get enough exercise. Therefore, school doctors and practitioners recommend low-fat milk and reduced fat dairy products in order to prevent young people against these catastrophic diseases.
- *Help instead of punishment – students without drugs*. Prevention from drugs is part of health promotion. Addiction is not considered a “vice”, but as a symptom of a disease whose origin is to be prevented.

Drug prevention

- should start as early as possible – before the existence of a real threat;
- is a continuous process, not a single action;
- creates conditions for leading a life that makes drugs dispensable;
- provides children and young people with personal and social skills, promotes self-confidence, responsibility, creativity and communication skills and shows a constructive approach to problems and conflicts;
- enables young people to say “no” and to resist social pressure;
- informs about alternatives to substances of abuse, and points to alternative possibilities of pleasure, stimulation and relaxation.
- The project “*Step by Step – Secondary Drug Prevention in Schools*” ... is aimed at young people who experiment with addictive behaviour or – to some extent – are already addicts. Affected students will be supported in addressing their problems and there should be the possibility to enable them to get positive secondary school qualifications. Step by Step offers:
 - training opportunities for school teams for in-depth discussions of the subject drug prevention, early detection, behavioural problems, communication skills,...
 - a CD-ROM with an extensive course of training and up-to-date information about counseling services, legislation and technical terms ...
 - a manual with additional suggestions (see also: <http://www.praevention.at/>).
- *Radiation Protection in Schools*. As part of the civil defence an extensive program of measures was developed by an interministerial working group (measures with possible nuclear accidents at nuclear power plants; required replacement of potassium iodide) (see the corresponding website of the Ministry of Health: <http://www.bmgfj.gv.at/cms/site/thema.html?channel=CH0781>, and the Civil Defense Association: <http://www.zivilschutzverband.at/>).
- *Together against violence*. The action is based on the fact that a good school climate can only be created jointly. A peaceful coexistence requires clear rules, even in the school habitat. About 40 percent of schools have reached agreements between parents, teachers and students. To encourage all schools in Austria to reach such agreements, a guideline for the preparation of joint agreements has been created.

In critical situations, school psychologists play an important role in preventing crises. For this reason, the responsible Ministry aims to increase the number of school psychologists by 20 percent from 150 to 180.

An important approach to prevent violence and raise awareness of the issue of violence is doing something with art. In the current school year 2010/11 is has been planned to run “theatre projects” on violence in each of the federal states in cooperation between theatres and schools.

Violence prevention and conflict management are of central interest at present – particularly in further teacher education (see: <http://www.gemeinsam-gegen-gewalt.at/die-weisse-feder/>).

The actions and campaigns outlined here are only a selection of projects particularly initiated on a federal level. Hence many other activities are organised at the level

of the federal provinces. In the context of autonomous curricula, resp. timetables schools may by themselves set appropriate priorities.

Other topics and tasks coming up in the very near future are: „Child Poverty and Health” as well as „Migration and Health” – maybe a suggestion for an interesting thesis or dissertation.

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VÝCHOVA KE ZDRAVÍ V RAKOUSKÝCH ŠKOLÁCH – ZAČLENĚNÍ DO UČEBNÍCH PLÁNŮ A SOUČASNÝCH INICIATIV

Abstrakt: Tento příspěvek uvádí – na základě nedávných výzkumů zdravotního stavu rakouských dětí a mládeže – některé výsledky z oblasti konzumace nikotinu

a alkoholu i obezity. Nedávné studie také poukazují na poměrně nový problém šikany v rakouských školách. První iniciativy v oblasti výchovy ke zdraví, které vznikly v osmdesátých letech minulého století, se primárně zaměřily na povědomí o výživě a zdravém cvičení; dnes se více kampaní soustřeďuje na konzumaci (požívání) tabáku a alkoholu a nověji také na jev „šikanování“. Takzvané životní a zdravotní dovednosti jsou stále častěji začleňovány do projektů a kampaní.

Klíčová slova: výchova ke zdraví, princip výuky, současné studie o zdraví dětí a mladistvých, požívání nikotinu a alkoholu, obezita, šikana, projekty a kampaně, životní a zdravotní návyky