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Health Education in English Language Classes: A Nightmare or a Challenge?

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Health education has been proclaimed one of the priorities of the European Union in the field of education and accepted by the Czech Ministry of Education. Subsequently health education appeared as a new subject in the basic school curriculum and our faculty is planning to open a new study programme for future teachers. We were asked to summarize what English teachers can do to promote health education in schools through English. This is the main aim of the paper which is primarily based on ideas of future teachers of English.

Introduction

The Pedagogical Faculty of the University of South Bohemia has decided to introduce a new study programme with a working title Health Education. Methodology teachers of all the faculty departments were asked to prepare a short material on how health education can be enhanced in their particular subjects. As a part of the project I asked my students to think what they could do as future teachers of English to promote health education in English language classes.

Why is health education such an important issue at present that new study programmes should be created to promote it? Why should it be taught across the curriculum? First of all the idea corresponds to a new global health policy aimed at meeting the major challenges in health during the next decades which has been developed by the World Health Organization. This policy for the 21st century, called *Health 21*, evolves from the health-for-all policy which has been a common aspirational goal since its inception in 1979.

The Czech Republic, a member of WHO and at the same time a new member of the European Union, has agreed and declared that health is one of the priorities of the national policy.

In the Czech Republic the Government within the already existing Board of Health and Environment has established a new committee called *Health 21* whose aim is to control, coordinate and check tasks emerging from the programme *Health 21*. The Committee should also inform the district commissioners about the policy and ask them to prepare similar programmes applying the state health policy in the regions.

The Role of School Education

From the point of view of school education the most important is Chapter 3. 3. titled *Health of Young People*. It is argued there that young people's psychological well-being, and consequently their health, is closely linked to the quality of their relationships with family members, other adults and peers. Young people may also be highly vulnerable to particular risks such as drug-taking and tobacco and alcohol use. At this age there is also the problem of unprotected sexual activities. In teenagers especially feelings and attitudes are experienced at a more intense level. There is a strong drive to conform to the norms of the peer group. Decreased physical activity and unhealthy eating habits have led to an increase in obesity among young people, which poses a substantial risk to health. Exposure to violence on TV and in computer games means an increasing incidence of violent behaviour which is accompanied by injuries – both intentional and unintentional. Advertising of many products such as tobacco and alcohol is counterproductive to health. At last but not least sexual abuse is a problem.

‘Schools are an important setting in which health can be created and sustained. Young people's perception of health can be greatly enhanced by the content of the formal teaching curriculum. Action to protect and promote health can be brought to life in the school's physical environment. On a wider level, the school influences the perceptions, attitudes, actions and behaviour not only of pupils but also of teachers, parents and others. All aspects of organizational life contribute to physical, social and emotional health; moreover the young learn best about responsibility and empowerment through direct participation in decision-making.’ (Health 21: 28) The European health promoting school approach combines these elements, and this concept should be introduced in all schools in the region.

European Network of *Health Promoting Schools* is a strategic programme for the European Region. It is supported by *the Council of Europe, the European Commission* and the *WHO* regional Office for Europe. Because the determinants of education and health are indivisibly linked, the programme seeks to integrate the policy and practice of the health promoting school into the wider health and education sectors. Its primary focus is the school pupil.

According to the authors, the health promoting school is based on a social model of health. This emphasises the entire organization of the school, as well as focusing upon the individual. At the heart of the model is the young person, who is viewed as a whole individual within a dynamic environment. Such an approach creates a highly supportive social setting that influences the visions, perceptions and actions of all who live, work, play and learn in the school. This generates a positive climate that influences how young people form relationships, make decisions and develop their values and attitudes. Healthy, well educated young people can help to reduce inequities in society, thus contributing to the health and wealth of the population at large.

Czech Schools

Within the new framework curriculum there have been defined various broader educational areas, among them People and Health which consists of two main subjects: Physical Education and Health Education. The minimal number of hours per week for both of them is 12 which equals two hours of physical education (it cannot be less than that) and one hour of health education per week, if it is structured individually. It can also become an integral part of other subjects. It depends on the decision of the particular school. At the lower primary level (grade 1-5) health education is an integral part of the educational area People and their World.

Survey

To find out what future teachers think about the issue of incorporating health education into English language classes I asked a group of 4 year students who are going to become teachers of English and another subject (either history, German, French, Spanish or Czech) what they think an English teacher can do to contribute to health education in schools. The students were given a task to write an essay on the topic. The content analysis of the 23 essays has brought the following ideas.

I would like to start with a quotation from one of them: “Without any doubt, health is considered to be the most precious thing people possess.” Most students mentioned that not only physical health is what matters, they seem to find mental health more important at least in our part of the world. That is why mental health should be dealt with in the English classes and in English textbooks, they believe.

As to physical health the students see the necessity to concentrate on the healthy lifestyle in English classes.

They say that pupils lack **physical activity** due to the development of new technologies, especially computer games. Children tend to sit either in front of a TV set or in front of the computer screen. That is why even English teachers should support the physical activity of the children. Health topics should be used for class discussions, e.g. possible dangers of sitting in front of the screen. The teachers should present the attractive world of sports, e.g. to show sport stars, present interviews with them in which the sportspeople would talk about the necessity of physical activity. It should be stressed that especially collective sport develops social behaviour and is also connected with a healthy diet.

The learners can be involved in some physical activity in English classes – especially connected with TPR (total physical response), e.g. the teacher giving commands and the children reacting physically. It is not only a useful listening activity which supports the natural acquisition of the language. Especially for younger children the physical break is extremely beneficial. Also going out with the class and practising vocabulary outside, e.g. names of objects around us – buildings, trees, animals, descriptions of scenes, people etc.

Learners should be taught to plan reasonable leisure activities which would involve some sort of physical activity. This could be easily done when the language function of expressing future is dealt with in the English classes.

Another important topic is a **healthy diet**. Students suggested not to show pictures of junk food like chips and hamburgers in the textbooks but instead show pictures of tasty healthy food like fresh salads and fruit instead of sweets. Also names of healthy kinds of food should be introduced, e.g. fibre, vitamins, low-fat products, cereal etc. Possible dangers of junk food like obesity should be discussed in class. To revise vocabulary the pupils would write lists of healthy and unhealthy food, for homework each child would write a recipe of a

healthy meal and then all the recipes would be put together and a healthy cookery book would be created.

Seeing the doctor would be another important topic in English. Students suggested role-plays – one pupil being the doctor, the other patient. The doctor would also give the patient some advice on the healthy lifestyle. Vocabulary development would be connected with such a topic. The pupils would learn vocabulary concerning illness, injuries, keeping fit and first aid. The pupils should be able to explain in English where to find a hospital or doctor in town. A student has pointed out that knowledge of English can save life.

More health topics in textbooks have been suggested, e.g. how often to see a general practitioner or a dentist, vaccination, etc.

Other topics connected with health appear in textbooks or additional materials – **drugs, tobacco, alcohol, mental anorexia**. Students think that especially the topics of drugs and anorexia are still interesting for students. The learners already know quite a lot about them from other subjects and they are willing to look for other sources of information in English, especially on the Internet. Role-plays have been suggested here (e.g. a pupil offers drugs to a peer and he/she refuses), and watching a film about drug addicts and a following discussion.

Older children could also deal with the topic of safe sex and various means of contraception in English.

More global problems as **environment, wars, conflicts and starvation** should not be neglected either but they should be introduced in a way which is appropriate to the age of the children.

Mental health, nevertheless, is seen as much more important than physical health by the students. The reason, they say, is that physical health topics have been discussed a lot in other classes and they have become somehow obvious. The students also think that it is very difficult to influence the learners in this way. Another reason is that mental and physical health are very much connected. A student has said that if we want to improve physical health we have to diminish stress and build self-confidence and responsibility of the pupils.

Good social relationships with people around us immensely contribute to our mental health, the students say. In some families, children are neglected, they do not get enough care, love and attention and this is reflected in their relationship with other people. That is why contacts between the teachers and the pupils' families are extremely important. The teacher should know his/her pupils well – their family background, their interests, hobbies, their strengths and weaknesses. This can help the teacher choose appropriate methods which enable learners to use their specific learning strategies.

In schools the relationships with the teacher but especially the relationships with schoolmates play a key role. Students suggest a lot of activities which would be done together and which would improve cooperation among pupils such as role-plays, pair work and especially group work and longer term projects. The learners should learn to cooperate, listen to the opinions of others, defend their own opinions, respect different thoughts and ideas. The teacher should respect the children as individuals, should respect their feelings, should be able to motivate them to learn, support their effort, use individual approach. The teacher and the learners are seen as partners, the learners should accept their responsibility for their own learning, behaviour and health. Learners should always know who to contact when a problem arises.

The importance of the stimulating **classroom atmosphere** seems to be crucial for the students. Both the learners and the teacher should feel well in the classroom. The teacher should be tolerant, should give the learners room to express their own opinions. We learn by mistakes, the students say. Mistakes are an integral part of learning. Pupils should not laugh at others making mistakes, and they should not be punished for making mistakes either. The

learners should not be afraid to speak spontaneously, real communication should be supported.

The teacher is not the only source of information, the learners bring to the class a lot of knowledge the teacher does not possess, they should be given a chance to display their knowledge and be a valuable source for the others. We can see aspects of the community language teaching here. The learners should be taught how to get information from other sources, from other books or especially the Internet. Coping with too much information has become a global problem of modern society. They argue that the ability to distinguish important information from the unnecessary is an important study skill which also contributes to mental health. The inability to cope with information might lead to serious depression.

English language classes should be a place where **integrating people with a difference** should be dealt with in depth. For our students it means people from poor background, people from broken families, people with a handicap and primarily people from various ethnic minorities whose number has been increasing.

All these issues should be freely discussed in class together with human relationships in general. Let me quote: "Our pupils must be taught that a different colour of skin or shabby clothes are no signs of an inferior human being. We should learn not to judge people by their exterior."

Students see the presence of pupils with other ethnic and cultural backgrounds as extremely beneficial to the class. They say that thanks to the higher numbers of foreigners in our schools, especially Russian and Vietnamese, the attitude of the majority towards the minorities has been improving. If the pupils have schoolmates with different cultural backgrounds it will be easy for the pupils to put up with for them strange cultures even in the future, it might even help them be more open to the Roma culture, it might help combat racism in general. The learners with different language and cultural background should be given a chance to speak about their own country, the class would for instance do a project on the country together.

The students think that as future teachers of English they should not teach only the language, they believe that the language is an instrument through which we can understand culture, so language and culture go hand in hand. That is why the students value highly the multicultural approach of many English textbooks. Interesting articles about other countries and cultures also serve as a contribution to history and geography classes.

Students believe in a more global approach at all levels of education in order to create independent personalities who would be able to use their knowledge, skills and experience for solving problems.

Activities supporting communication, collaboration and learner autonomy are highly valued, as has been pointed out already. Students suggest especially projects – e.g. health across curriculum, in which the learners would integrate what they already know from other subjects. A student suggested a project Healthy Life at Our School in which the learners would express what they expect from their teachers and their classes. Using cartoons, the Internet, watching films linked to health, writing screenplays and dramatizations was also suggested in the essays.

The importance of cooperation between schools and other organizations responsible for health of young people has been stressed. Visits of specialists in various fields – e.g. drugs, mental health, healthy diet, etc. would be welcome.

Conclusion

From the ideas of future teachers of English expressed in the essays, it can be seen that integrating health education in subjects across the curriculum is a reasonable aim. English language classes seem to create a lot of possibilities for promoting health education. At the beginning the learners deal with basic health topics such as a healthy diet, physical activities and seeing the doctor. At a more advanced stage the learners are old enough and at the same time equipped with enough language to be able to deal with more sophisticated topics connected especially with mental health.

How health education is incorporated into the ELT syllabi of textbooks of English would be a topic for further research.

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