



Creating Healthy Schools and Student Engagement: The Got Health? Initiative

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the findings from a study entitled *Got Health?* and its initiative to discover how student-led health inquiry projects lead to healthy school environments, student engagement and connectedness. The intention was to empower students to create healthy change in their school settings by providing them with training, teacher guidance and opportunities to be change agents. Ten schools participated in the study. Each school identified a teacher champion and a team of students to actively address and promote health issues through student led inquiry projects. Semi-structured focus groups were used to collect data and a framework analysis approach was used for analysis. Results revealed that most participants gained a sense of connectedness to their school and peers, improved their health awareness and facilitated student engagement. With adult-led support, schools should consider utilizing student-led initiatives to assist in health-related activities.

Key words: healthy schools; student engagement; connectedness.

Favoriser les écoles en santé et l'implication des élèves - Initiative *Got Health?*

Résumé

Cet article présente les résultats d'une étude intitulée *Got Health?* et une initiative connexe visant à expliquer pourquoi les projets d'enquête sur la santé menés par les élèves favorisent la santé à l'école, l'implication des élèves et un sens d'appartenance à une communauté.. Cette initiative visait à aider et encourager les élèves à instaurer des changements sains à l'école en leur offrant de la formation, en suscitant l'appui du personnel enseignant et en leur donnant l'occasion de devenir des agents de changement. Dix écoles ont participé à l'étude. Chacune a désigné une enseignante ou un enseignant comme leader et délégué à un groupe d'élèves la tâche de cerner les grands enjeux de santé à leur école et de promouvoir la santé en mettant sur pied des projets d'enquête. Les élèves ont fait appel à des groupes de consultation semi-structurés pour recueillir des données et à un cadre d'analyse pour interpréter les résultats. Les données ont révélé que la plupart des participants se sentaient plus branchés sur leur école et sur leurs pairs. Ils semblaient aussi plus sensibles aux enjeux de santé et plus désireux de s'impliquer. Les écoles devraient songer à recourir à des initiatives menées par les élèves, aidés d'adultes, pour réaliser leurs activités de promotion de la santé.

Mots clés: écoles en santé; implication des étudiants; sens de communauté.

Healthy schools- Student engagement

Introduction

Empowering students to feel connected to their school and improve their school climate are timely and important elements of contemporary education (Healthy Schools BC, 2016). Moreover, schools have been recognized as appropriate locations for youth to practice decision-making skills. School connectedness is defined as the belief by students that adults and peers in school care about their learning, as well as about themselves as individuals (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [CDCP] 2010). Importantly, students who feel connected to their school experience fewer risk-related behaviours (Battisch & Hom, 1997.) Eccles and Gootman (2002) noted that students who believe that youth play a meaningful part in decision-making at their schools feel a sense of positive connection and are more engaged with school. Research also illustrates the positive effect of school climate on levels of self-esteem, psychological wellbeing, and academic achievement (Bryan et al., 2012; Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). Hence, school connectedness can aid students in developing skills to be innovative, resilient members of society.

Unfortunately, 50-60% of grade school students are *chronically disengaged* (Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Gaenzle, Kim, Lin, & Na, 2012; Corso, Bundick, Quaglia, & Haywood, 2013). This is an overwhelming number and a problem for school systems around the globe (Willms, 2003). Many programs and initiatives, such as the World Health Organization's Health Promoting Schools, target disengaged students by encouraging school boards to consider students as key stakeholders, helping teachers improve their classroom management skills, and to creating empowering environments for students (Stewart- Brown, 2006). The pursuit of empowerment of students and improvement of school climate have come forward as crucial elements in education, especially regarding physical and mental health outcomes. Currently, a gap in the research exists regarding how to *achieve* student connectedness, empowerment, and engagement.

School Connectedness and Student Engagement

Adults and peers in the school setting who are respectful and value student wellbeing and success characterize school connectedness. Along the same lines as connectedness, positive school climate may be described as a caring environment where students have access to a variety of opportunities to participate in activities, decision-making, and share a similar set of norms and values (CDCP, 2010). These constructs, which may differ in specific defining terminology, are thought to lead to student engagement. Students who are engaged in their learning are more likely to be invested in their education, and being engaged in school is considered a protective factor (Bryan et al., 2012; Thapa et al., 2013) against dangers such as substance abuse, school absenteeism and dropout, early sexual experiences, acts of violence, accidental injury, as well as emotional distress (Bryan et al., 2012; CDCP, 2010; Corso et al., 2013; Koehn & Cassels, 2012; Thapa et al., 2013). It also appears that school connectedness is one of the leading predictors of positive adolescent health, along with family connectedness (Koehn & Cassels, 2012), and positive school climate may help increase levels of self-esteem, psychological wellbeing, and academic achievement (Bryan et al., 2012; Thapa et al., 2013).

Student engagement and connectedness have health related overtones. It could be argued that the goal of empowerment and creation of engagement is to increase students' resiliency. Anderson, Kalnins, and Raphael (1999) noted that resilient youth are competent individuals who demonstrate life skills such as problem solving, critical thinking and have the ability to take

initiative. Individuals who have developed strong resiliency skills have the ability to cope with challenging life events and can more easily overcome adversity. Resiliency, in turn, may lead to greater health and life outcomes due to a sense of competence and control (Anderson et al., 1999) and the school environment is of particular importance when developing resiliency skills (Thapa et al., 2013). Adolescents spend a considerable amount of time in the classroom, and teachers and peers may have an influence through some of this critical stage of development. Sound teaching practices and opportunities for participation and decision-making may empower youth to create visions for themselves academically, as well as in other areas of their lives. However, there are other influences that need consideration. As stated by Basch (2011), it would be unreasonable to expect schools to address and close all of the disparities among different groups of students. Each determinant of health such as family influence, social and economic status, mental and physical health, social networks, ethnicity and culture, may predict and possibly change an individual's life outcomes. An analysis of 42 countries indicates that 38 percent of youth from low socio-economic status (SES) families feel less connected to their schools than their peers (Willms, 2003). Corso et al. (2013) noted that gender is another important consideration and stated that girls are generally more engaged in school than boys. Gadin, Weiner, and Ahlgren (2013) suggest that gender roles and power dynamics exist and may be perpetuated when teachers and adult leaders allow them to. These results may differ according to country, city, neighbourhood, and individual school, therefore, it is important for teachers and staff to consider how groups may differ in needs (Willms, 2003). For example, Thapa et al. (2013) emphasize the difference of perception of school climate between different racial groups. Some studies show that African American and Hispanic/Latino students may perceive close relationships with teachers as more important, whereas Caucasian and Asian students may emphasize the importance of teachers and students modeling positive behaviours.

Students as Stakeholders

Students are arguably the biggest stakeholders in the education system. Policy, teaching practices, and health programs are all aimed at capitalizing on student potential in order to produce healthy, educated and capable citizens (BC Ministry of Education, 2016). That said, very few school boards and other decision-making councils include student leaders (Feuer & Mayer, 2009). This may have an impact on what programs are being implemented in the school. If teachers are unaware of the severity or importance of certain issues that arise in a school setting, it is unlikely that relevant programs will be implemented and school climate could suffer as a result. As pointed out by the Pan Canadian Joint Consortium for School Health (2010), it is logical to include the main beneficiaries in decision-making. There is a lack of research in the area, but inclusion of students could help increase the acceptability of school programs among youth and may give students a sense of investment in their education.

Future research on student engagement and leadership should be focused on what issues and initiatives are perceived as most important by students (McConnell et al., 2014). Adult leadership in the school and community is vital, but a solely adult vision may limit the potential of programs aimed at improving the education and quality of life of our youth. It would be beneficial to explore the impact of empowering our students and allowing them to become leaders (Dempster & Lizzio, 2007; Hine, 2012). One such program which has been implemented in a school district in Western Canada is entitled Got Health (GH)?

GH was developed by two school district Health Promoting School Coordinators in the attempt to help engage students in shaping various health initiatives in schools within one school

district in British Columbia. Based upon the literature and feedback from students and teachers, there was a need to explore the effects of empowering students in allowing them to take on leadership roles in developing healthy school climates. It was hypothesized that after the implementation of GH, students would feel empowered to make change in their school and, therefore, help in creating healthier school climates.

Methodology

Project Design

Utilizing an action research (AR) methodology (Creswell, 2012; Herr & Anderson, 2005), GH took place in a large urban school district in Western Canada. Students from four elementary schools, three middle schools, two secondary schools and one alternate school, who were from a mix of socio economic levels and ethnic backgrounds, were invited to participate in the project. The student population for each school ranged from 187 to 725.

Applications for submission to take part in GH were distributed to teachers and students at the beginning of the school year (September) through the school district portal, email contacts and were also accessible through the District Health Promoting Schools website. Ten school teams applied and all ten teams were accepted. School teams included students (2-8 student leaders per school), at least one lead teacher, whose function was to guide and support the students through the inquiry process, as well as administrators, and community partners (such as parents and public health nurses). The action research cycles involved planning (establishing school health teams, complete school health assessments), acting (implementing activities, measuring results), observing (seeing the activities take place in each school), and reflecting (meeting in school groups and discussing what was successful and what needed change). The cyclical nature of the study progressed throughout the duration of the GH program, which ran from October to May. At the commencement of the GH program, there were two initial half-day training sessions provided, one in late October, the other in mid-November. The first half-day session was for the lead teachers only and provided them with information on the four pillars of Comprehensive School Health, the inquiry process, and supports that would be available for them throughout the year. The second half day training session occurred two weeks later and included the full teams of students, teachers and partners. At this session, students also learned about the four pillars of Comprehensive School Health. They were given the opportunity to share issues their school faced within each pillar, as well as areas they felt were going well in their school. Each school team shaped their inquiry question (the issue they wanted to address/improve/act on), mapped out a plan of action for the project, and began to think about ways to collect and analyze data that could be utilized later for reflection. The inquiry question was the driving force behind the projects each school team implemented. Table 1 provides a description of each school team's inquiry question.

Table 1. *School Team Inquiry Questions*

Elementary School A	How will more activities and access to equipment improve student participation in healthy activities at recess?
Elementary School B	How will having a school garden improve student attitudes around healthy eating and knowledge about how plants grow?
Elementary School C	How will organized lunch activities improve social wellness and relationships between students?
Elementary School D	How will a community garden improve school and student health?
Middle School A	How will completing a healthy recipe improve grade six snack choices?
Middle School B	How will educating grade six students on healthy food choices affect what they choose to eat?
Middle School C	How will creating a week-long event and video about ____ Middle School's eco-healthy initiatives stimulate the student population to more eco-healthy behavior?
Secondary School A	How will improving school spirit and school participation create a healthier school environment?
Secondary School B	How will the Student Wellness Room improve our school environment?
Alternate School A	How will having a clean drinking water supply improve the school environment?

Each school team was provided with support in the form of a \$500 grant, teacher release time (1.5 days of release time outside of the training sessions and 1.5 days of release time for the training sessions and final celebration and sharing of the projects), as well as training and support from the school district's Health Promoting School Coordinators.

In January and February, the Health Promoting Schools Coordinators met with all teams and assisted them in implementing the next steps for their inquiry project and connecting them with other schools and community partners to support their endeavours. The Coordinators met with the groups again in March and April to conduct focus group sessions, to discuss progress of the projects and to collect video footage for the celebration video. Students were given the opportunity to share their projects and findings at the final celebration in May.

Participants

The research participants were a volunteer sample of children and youth aged 10-18 years, who were members of the individual school health teams, and their lead teachers. Students were selected based on their willingness to participate and were also identified by each lead teacher as responsible students. A total of 15 male and 32 female (47 total) students participated in the

focus group sessions. There were 6 teachers who participated and provided feedback. Table 2 shows the breakdown:

Table 2. *Breakdown of focus group sessions*

	Male	Female	Total Students	Teachers
Elementary (grades 4-6)	7	25	32	3
Middle (grades 8-9)	6	7	13	2
High (grade 11)	3	0	3	1
Total	15	32	47	6

Data Collection

Data was collected via semi-structured focus group sessions, one at each participating school. Questions were posed and free discussion and input was encouraged. Table 3 identifies the list of questions used.

Table 3. *Interview Questions*

1. In what ways did the Got Health? program change your school environment?
2. What were the good things about the Got Health? project in your school?
3. What challenges did you have?
4. Do you think it is important that students lead the change in health initiatives in schools? Why or why not?

Social and Physical Environment:

5. In what way did your project affect the social and physical environment of your school?

Teaching and Learning:

6. What did you learn from the Got Health? project? What do you think other students in your school learned from the Got Health? project?

Healthy School Policies:

7. How did the Got Health? project affect policies at your school?

Partnerships and Services:

8. How did the Got Health? project create new partnerships and services for your school?

Each focus group session was digitally recorded and structured to garner feedback about how the GH initiative impacted the school environment; benefits and challenges of GH; student engagement in school health activities; and youth involvement in facilitating change in their school. At the conclusion of each focus group, the participants were given the opportunity to check the interview for accuracy by having the interviews played back to them. This process of using member checks was to determine the accuracy of the account, and to limit any false

interpretations of the information made by the researcher. Administrative, teacher and parental consent, as well as student assent were obtained prior to the study. The study was granted approval by both the University Human Research Ethics Board and the School District's ethics committee.

Data Analysis

Focus group data were transcribed and reviewed to generate preliminary coding categories (Check & Schutt, 2011) and a framework analysis approach was used to analyse the data. Framework analysis uses four stages of data analysis; familiarization, thematic identification, charting and interpretation (Rabiee, 2004). To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the study democratic and dialogic validity was used (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Democratic validity refers to the accurate representation of the multiple perspectives of those who have a stake in an action research study. Herr and Anderson (2005) view it as an ethical and social justice issue, and indicate that all parties need to have their perspectives taken into account. In order to enhance the democratic validity, interview data was gathered from both the students and teachers involved in the study. Dialogic validity refers to the process of letting others review the research, which has been conducted (Herr & Anderson, 2005). The researchers obtained the aid of a colleague, who was not directly involved in the research study, to read and interpret the data collected to determine the accuracy of interpretations. The colleague was someone who voluntarily agreed to participate and had experiences with data analysis techniques.

Results

The following themes emerged from the interview data: motivation and relevance; connectedness; health awareness and action; and enjoyment at school.

Motivation and Relevance

Based on the data, there were many benefits to student-led implementation, some stated directly by the student participants, and some observed by their teachers and community leaders. Responses from students at all levels (elementary, middle and high school) were in support of the student-led nature of the GH initiatives. Students described a greater feeling of relevance of material when delivered by their peers. Some students also described student-led activities as being less intimidating than adult-led activities.

Student motivation for the GH activities increased in some cases, as indicated by one student, for example, who said, “when they hear from a student they think – oh, that's kinda what I think so they'll actually do that” (middle school student). Seeing other students demonstrate and lead activities further demonstrated to some shy students that a young person could do these activities. Some of the comments showed positive feelings about the school as a result of leading an initiative, “I think we like being leaders of some stuff. Because it makes you feel like you're doing something good for the school and the students” (elementary school student).

Connectedness

Connectedness, in this case, refers to whether or not, or to what extent, students feel connected to their school, their school community, and each other. Preece (2009) indicates that connectedness involves close ties that students develop within their school environment which

includes a sense of belonging to a community, trust in school administration, a sense of safety, and confidence in a school's commitment to them.

Teachers observed that involvement in this initiative helped some students feel more connected and engaged, and created a more collaborative environment at the school. As one teacher indicated, “They’ve learned to collaborate really well; to accept people within the group; to share responsibility and to understand the importance of emotional health” (elementary school teacher). Another teacher commented “Ya, it’s good...they’re talking to each other now. The littler kids are starting to talk to each other about healthier eating” (elementary school teacher). “...It gets them more involved, because a lot of times the students are just ‘Yup, whatever you say teacher’ and then now the students are actually taking action – doing something” (high school teacher). One middle school teacher also described how her whole school came together through the students and their work, with other teachers getting on board, and it became a whole school initiative. One student referenced a connection in this way, “...ever since our Got Health? meeting since we came to the [meeting place], um, we got inspired and [school name] has never had any sports teams or really had any clubs of any sort, so it's really changed our school” (elementary school student). One student referred to the project as connecting incoming students who were surveyed during the course of the project. “I think it gave them more of a connection to the school because they might be like nervous or worried or something coming into the big school...” (high school student). Such connections to the school community allow the development of a culture of collegiality in environments where real collaboration happens – such cultures assist new students in easier integration. “...the Got Health? has really kind of brought this group together and our friends like our class together...it's really worked” (elementary school student). Other student groups reference the collegial nature of the projects spreading to the other members of a class and in some cases, assisting in friendships and helping to mitigate exclusion. For example “I met new friends because of Got Health...like I have more friends.” The students also described a spectrum of results impacting classrooms, recess, and after school activities. Regardless of the scope of such changes, it is important to note that the some students involved believed that a difference had been made and connections between students were created. Such attitudes in students around self-efficacy and empowerment may lead to active, involved, healthier student populations (Cargo, Grams, Ottoson, Ward & Green, 2003; Jennings, Parra-Medina, Hilfinger-Messias & McLoughlin, 2006).

Health Awareness and Action

All of the schools that participated mentioned marked differences in students’ healthy eating around the buildings, an increase in physical activity or social wellbeing (the majority of the inquiry projects addressed these issues). One elementary school student stated, “I've noticed a bunch of kids have started eating fresh foods, like my brother at home...if you just walk into the classrooms you'll see a lot more healthy foods than you'd seen before.” Another claimed that “They've learned how to eat healthier because some people bring like a whole bunch of gummy bears to school...now people are bringing vegetables and they’re bringing healthy food cause they learned how to eat healthy” (elementary school student). Lastly, one student described the need for a healthy eating initiative in their school, with evidence of change due to their project: “...Some parents don't pack a lot of vegetables in their school lunches. So um, the school gives them on certain days.” One school, which didn't describe gains, still described hope for change: “We hope [Got Health] will help make healthier food in the cafeteria...more awareness for when the Grade 7's come in next year so they can have healthier options” (middle school student). This

attitude speaks to commitment, connection to the inquiry project and continuity of vision – all of these are evidence of the development or support of positive student attributes. Apart from the obvious benefits of healthy food in school lunches, some students described these habits moving into homes and impacting family members.

While some schools noted awareness around healthy eating, others were cognizant of the increases pertaining to physical activity. “More people are active and playing and having fun and being healthy” (elementary school student). “...our Got Health clubs help students to be more active – to get out and have fun with new people” (high school student).

Enjoyment at School

Comments about “being happy” and “seeing others happy” were frequent. Students indicated that they were “...making new friends” (middle school student), “...having fun outside” (elementary school student), and some described how “it's really nice watching kids having fun and making games up” (elementary school student). Most described increased feelings of connectedness and a greater sense of community. They made statements about making an impact, and leaving “...a legacy” of sorts (mentioned by elementary, middle and high school students), declarations which indicate feelings of positivity and empowerment about their school and school community. Generally, the student leaders enjoyed watching other students have fun while participating in their initiatives; they liked seeing other students benefitting from their work. Almost without exception, participants used the word “fun” to describe both the way they felt about the initiatives they were leading, and the way they felt about working within their own GH groups. Either way, they were enjoying what they were doing and this translated in many cases into committing to the projects and their respective school.

Student Challenges

Leading peers

At various times, students at all levels of school found the reality of leading their peers in activities more difficult than they expected, particularly in the elementary and middle schools. One student stated, “There's an issue with student authority and really how far you can step with peers” (middle school student). Another described, “It's actually hard to control the Grade Sevens because they think that just because they are older that they are the best” (elementary school student). Some cited occasional problems with behaviour, and a lack of experience with the planned in-built structures necessary for younger children to perform tasks. Time, and occasionally reinforced or refined expectations, were necessary to smooth out some of these difficulties. At times, the teacher leaders intervened at the start to problem solve some of these relational issues with the student leaders, or to pass on structures and strategies that were effective in leading young people through tasks. As time progressed, the students became more used to the expectations on both sides, and the activities progressed more smoothly.

Students referenced overcoming these early challenges and the learning that resulted from it. “...so we just set limits and you know and we also have a teacher there... and they just help us out with things” (elementary school student). This is consistent with Cargo et al. (2003) as they described the need to have a responsive model of adult support, intervening in order to get the student leaders unstuck and then pulling back when they were comfortable again. The students interviewed did describe challenges, but explained how they had found ways to work through them, increasing their own capacity and confidence.

Planning and implementation of ideas

Students at all levels commented that the inquiry process involved in the project implementation was more complex than what they initially thought were simple ideas. Lead teacher support and the connection to community partners were key components for guiding the students through this process. At one elementary school, student leaders who created a school garden, made a number of comments discussing the need to see “the whole picture” in planning activities. Some described the necessity of “...starting again from the beginning in re-planning the way the initiative was planned.” In all cases however, students described added value to their experiences as a result of “being in positions of leadership”, even finding ways to bring positives out of failure and challenges.

Discussion

The purpose of the GH program was to empower students to make change in their school and, therefore, help in creating healthier school settings. These leadership roles assisted in helping them promote their own, as well as their peers’ physical and psychosocial health. Today’s youth may benefit from a sense of belonging and connectedness in their schools by building leadership skills and resiliency. Initiatives such as the GH program may equip our students with the qualities and skills needed to become healthy and contributing members of society.

Similar to McConnell et al. (2014), the results showed that GH increased connectedness between students as well as within the school community. Students commented on improved overall health awareness, increased opportunities to meet new people, and the ability to recognize changes in their thoughts about healthy choices. Some of the challenges identified during the program included maintaining momentum, motivating peers and, at the high school level, addressing negativity from other students about activities. Based on the overall thoughts and opinions from the students and teachers involved as research participants in the focus groups, GH was a promising strategy for youth engagement and developing school connectedness, key assets in youth development (Leffert et al., 1998) and health promotion. However, some comments also demonstrated the need to modify parts of the program design to enhance its effectiveness.

Having students involved in decision-making to make meaningful change in the school environment created closer connections between students, teachers and students, and allowed the students to create and facilitate their own vision of leadership. Their experiences were positive and in many cases, these students started to shape peer expectations and norms seen on school grounds. With more students playing and sharing in healthy endeavours together, the GH student team members felt as though some of their peers were changing. In some schools, the inquiry projects were designed to increase healthy eating, or health awareness among their peers. These projects were not always successful in their goal, but it appears as though the process and commitment to the project had the desired outcome of connectedness and empowerment. Several considerations need to be made for future implementation of GH programs:

- The need for a baseline and follow up measure of student’s perceptions of school climate, outlets for leadership, and psychosocial strengths/short-comings of their school environments.
- Continued support of groups by GH administrator.

- Consideration of which students participate in GH (eg. student volunteers may already be engaged students; what would happen if we recruited chronically disengaged or at-risk students?)

This project is one example of how engaging students in health promotion and peer leadership can benefit them in ways that other initiatives may not be able to accomplish. School systems need to continue to encourage youth in getting involved in their own communities to help build resiliency and connectedness with one another as well as the school environment. Programs such as GH may help promote healthy school environments and student leadership which may be useful for future student-led inquiry projects and encourage further research into school health promotion.

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