

## What is health promotion in Swedish upper secondary school? An analysis of how the teacher comes across in student health plans

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### Abstract

Ever since the Ottawa charter in 1986, health promotion through schools has been stressed across the globe. In Sweden, where the present study is set, school health promotion is stipulated on a national level by the Education Act and the Health and Medical Services Act. It is emphasized in national directives that health promotion should be part of the education. The present study aims to widen our understandings of health promotion by exploring the so-called Student Health Plan (SHP) in upper secondary schools, which is a document conducted to concretize the national directives. The aim of the study is to examine how the teacher comes across in the SHPs regarding health promotion. The data consists of 37 SHPs from high schools. The SHPs were analyzed using thematic analysis and the data was coded and divided into themes. The analysis resulted in two themes: *The “invisible” teacher* and *The visible teacher*. Teachers are largely “invisible” in the SHPs and lack tasks and responsibility. When the teacher is visible, student attendance, teaching and relational work are areas of responsibility in health promotion. Standard teacher tasks are considered health promotion, which motivates the question of the necessity of a SHP. The findings also suggest that regular teaching is health promoting, strengthening the key role of the teacher in the health promoting work.

**Keywords:** teacher, health, student, education, pedagogy

### Introduction

Health promotion today is not solely the responsibility of health care professionals but takes place in different arenas and by multiple professions. School has been identified as an important arena for promoting health by both national and global actors, the World Health Organization perhaps being the main actor with their Health Promoting Schools. Today, schools are not only made responsible for providing high quality education, they should also work with student health promotion in order to ensure healthy students who succeed at learning (St Leger, 2004).

The teacher is key for successful health promotion (St Leger, 2000). Research about how schools can promote health has been summarized in for example the Health promoting schools programme and the whole school approach. Both of these emphasize that school personnel, teachers in particular, consider health promotion an important objective of their work in order to make health promotion successful (Lee et al., 2020, Weare och Nind, 2011, IUHPE, 2010). Even though there is a strong evidence base of the mutual relationship between well-being and learning, academic achievement and health tend to be competing rather than synergistic priorities for schools (Elgar et al., 2015, Viner et al., 2012).

Teachers have many pressing commitments, teaching the core subject knowledge reasonably being the main one. Health promotion often remains a marginal aspect of teachers' work but pedagogic practices supportive to students' well-being are important for student health (IUHPE, 2010).

In Sweden, where the study is set, efforts have been made to include the teacher in health promotion through national guidelines. Since the Swedish school system is decentralized, these guidelines are interpreted locally and concretized in documents known as Student Health Plans (SHPs). The aim of this study is to examine how the teacher comes across in these documents, in regard to health promotion.

## Health promotion

The term health promotion is well used in research and policy making. Even so, the term has been criticized for being vague and already in 1985 Tannahill (1985) wrote that the term had acquired so many meanings it had become meaningless and referred to as a „semantic mess“. The meaning of the term may vary, but there seems to be consensus regarding its centrality for public health. The World Health Organization has defined health promotion as „the process of enabling people to increase control over and improve their health“ (WHO, 1986), a definition which stresses individual autonomy and control over one's health.

This definition was developed further in the material for WHO's Health Promoting Schools. It is explained that health entails an ability and willingness to act health promotingly (European Network for Health Promoting Schools, 2006). Whether or not people have this will and ability is affected by for example confidence, self-esteem, a belief in the future and your ability to change and your perception of what others think of you. People's health promoting actions are also affected by the people they surround themselves with and their socio economic status. Social and environmental circumstances can lead to feelings of despair and ill-health (ibid.).

School and teachers have the potential to affect the health and well-being of students both in a positive and negative direction, mainly because school is a social environment with intrapersonal relationships. The teacher is central in health promotion in schools because of the impact they have on children and young people through their relationship and the potential to affect their confidence, self-esteem and emotional health. Participation, empowerment and democratic decisions are key components for health promotion in schools (European Network for Health Promoting Schools, 2006).

## Previous research

Health promotion in school has been empirically explored before but the role of the teacher in student health promotion is a field in need of further empirical investigation. In their study on factors promoting teacher participation in health promotion on an organizational level, Viig och Wold (2005) identified documents containing plans for the health promoting work where the teachers are involved as key. Jourdan et al. (2016) stress other important factors for successful teacher involvement in health promotion. They claim that health promotion in schools needs to be sensitive to teacher professional identity and blend successfully with current teacher practice. According to Lee et al (2007) the success of health promotion in schools depends on teachers' beliefs about whether or not they have the professional capacity and a contribution to make.

In Sweden, research on health promotion in schools has focused largely on the SHS (Reuterswård och Hylander, 2017) or health promoting interventions or initiatives (Wickström, 2018). Regarding the teacher, there are studies exploring the role of the teacher in preventive or remediating work, i.e. when student health and learning is already in jeopardy (Rosvall, 2020).

A quantitative study was conducted by Warne et al. (2017) analyzing self-reported positive health in students aged 12-16. They concluded that positive health is strongly associated with teacher support and classroom participation. Similar findings were made by Hammerin et al. (2018) in a study of high-school girls with psycho-somatic school related symptoms, showing that participation in teaching could improve the health of students experiencing ill-health due to academic stress.

Teachers consider themselves both the first and last out post in the work with student health. The attitude among the teachers regarding health promotion varies from an unwillingness and wish for someone else to handle it, to being too involved and it taking priority over the teaching (Törnsén, 2011). The main issues appear to be time and competence. Teachers in general want to work with student health, but feel like they do not have enough time or proper training which creates uncertainty (ibid.).

Guvå and Hylander (2012) have studied cooperation between teachers and the student health services (SHS) in the health promoting work. They found that successful health promotion which includes the teachers need to have a clear connection between health promotion and learning.

## Material and Method

The present study examines how health promotion is interpreted locally in Swedish upper secondary schools. It specifically analyses how the teachers come across and what tasks and responsibilities they are given regarding health promotion in documents called Student Health Plans (SHPs). Since the Swedish school system is decentralized, with the municipality responsible for the local schools, (except for those which are privately run.) these national directives need to be interpreted locally in each school or municipality. That is what the SHPs are for; to interpret and concretize national directions and guide the school's work with student

health. The SHP can exist at a municipal level, where all schools in one municipality share the same SHP. It can also exist on a school or school unit level, meaning that larger schools can have several SHPs.

For the present study, 37 SHPs were collected from upper secondary schools throughout Sweden. The documents were collected via e-mail communication with the municipalities and the schools. The municipalities were chosen using dispersion sampling, both regarding geographical location and number of citizens. An e-mail was sent to 23 municipalities, three of which did not have an SHP, three did not respond and one declined participation.

The SHPs ranged in length between four and 32 pages and differed in both layout and content. The ongoing analysis of the SHPs is an inductive thematic analysis at the semantic level (Braun och Clarke, 2006).

## Results

Tentative results show great variation regarding both how and to what extent the teacher comes across in the health promoting work. The actual word *teacher* is never used in some plans, whereas in others it is used 40-50 times. The analysis indicates two themes regarding how the teachers come across in the SHPs; *the “invisible” teacher* and *the visible teacher*.

### The “invisible” teacher

When the teacher is “invisible” it means that the word teacher is not used but it is discernable from the context that the teacher is implicated. In the student health plans, the teacher can be “invisible” mainly in two different ways. The first one is when the teacher is mentioned together with other school professions using the term “all personnel”.

The health promoting work of the school shall focus on long-term solutions to strengthen the physical, psychological and social well-being of all students for the purpose of promoting health and learning. Health promotion is carried out by all personnel and without the occurrence of a specific problem. (SHP11)

The term “all personnel” does not specify the teacher, or any other profession, but it is clear that the teacher is included. The responsibility given in the quote is vague and written in the form of a statement rather than a request. To carry out health promotion “without the occurrence of a specific problem” could be considered self-explanatory since it is the definition of health promotion. If a problem has occurred it is not longer promotion but preventive or remediating actions.

Another example of when the teacher is included but not specified is the following quote: “All personnel shall contribute together to the creation of environments which promote learning, development and health in the students.” (SHP 30) The quote is demanding and the word “shall” indicates a clear responsibility but it is again not specified what is to be done or by whom. The teacher is invisible in the sense that they are not given specific responsibility or concrete tasks in the health promoting work.

## The visible teacher

When the teacher is visible in the SHPs, it means that the word *teacher* is used. However, how the teachers come across and to what extent varies greatly. They come across in different parts of the SHPs, under different headlines, both initially with general formulations as well as later on in the plans with more specific responsibilities and tasks. Sometimes the word teacher is used not without any specific responsibilities and tasks in the health promoting work. The teacher comes across as central and important, as in the following quote where the teacher is highlighted as “the most important student health resource in school” because of their relationship with the students: “Studies show that the teacher is the most important health resource in school, primarily because of their relationship with the students.” (SHP 12).

Even though the teacher initially comes across as vital for student health, no responsibility or health promoting tasks are assigned to the teacher further on in the plan. The teacher is only mentioned in relation to receiving help and support from the student health services:

The special education needs organizer in the student health services work together with school personnel to develop accessibility in the pedagogical environment of the school and work specifically for students’ right to feel included in the school environment based on their abilities. They support and strengthen teachers in their work with classes and groups. (SHP 12)

It is not specified what “accessibility in the pedagogical environment of the school” entails and how it can be achieved. For the teacher to initially come across as important but to then not be given any responsibility in the health promoting work is a recurring pattern in the SHPs.

When the teacher is given specific tasks and responsibilities, student attendance is a common area. In SHP 2, under the headline *Focal areas and actions for the health promotion and preventive work of the SHS* the following quote is found:

Attendance is an important prerequisite for the development, learning and health of students. Teachers document student attendance on a daily basis using School 24. The mentor has a responsibility to follow up on student absence and communicated with student and legal guardians. (EHP 2)

To take attendance could indeed be considered health promotion, in the sense of validating the students and making them feel noticed and valued. In this quote however, it appears to be the actual reporting or documenting of attendance that is in focus and not the social aspect. To communicate with students and legal guardians can also be health promoting but when absence is already a problem it is no longer health promotion.

Another area where the teacher is visible in the health promoting work is regarding teaching. To have a plan for the semester and to add tests and essay deadlines to a class calendar are examples of task included in teaching that in the SHPs are considered health promotion. Responsibility for adapting the teaching to the needs of the students is also a health promoting responsibility:

As a teacher you adapt your teaching to your entire class as well as the individual needs of your students. It can for example mean using alternative ways of testing knowledge, well thought out use of digital aids and clarity in communication by using for example lesson logs and instructions. (SHP 21)

These tasks and the definition of health promotion is in a way very detailed and concrete, yet no different from ordinary teaching tasks. It is likely that this work would be carried out with or without a SHP since it is regulated in other guidelines.

In a small number of SHPs, the teacher comes across as responsible for social or relational work with the students. It is the relationship between the teacher and the students that is stressed and the responsibility of the teacher to establish trust.

In the health promoting work it is the responsibility of the teacher to establish a good and trusting relationship with their students so it becomes natural for the student to talk to their teacher on a regular basis regarding questions of knowledge development as well as of a more social character (SHP 7).

When the teacher is visible in the SHPs regarding health promotion, it is not only in relation to responsibility and tasks directed towards the students. An area where the teacher comes across explicitly is in regard to receiving support, guidance, tutoring or education from the student health services.

The task of the student health services is to promote learning, development and health in students. In order to succeed, we need to tutor teachers in acquiring the tools to handle their pedagogical mission in a good way, since classroom leadership is central. (SHP 29)

In the above quote, classroom leadership is described as central to promote learning, development and health in students. It is the teacher who provides this leadership but is here describe as in need of tutoring by the SHS in order to fulfill their pedagogical and health promoting task. The teacher comes across as ill-equipped or unable to handle the task given to them on a national level.

## Discussion and conclusion

Although being key to student health promotion, the teacher is largely "invisible" in the SHPs and without tasks or responsibility and it appears difficult to specify and concretize the health promoting work of the teacher. This is in line with previous research showing the complexity in defining the term *health promotion*.



When the teacher is visible, the tasks and responsibilities overall are no different in the SHP than those already stated in a general job description for (Swedish) teachers. One conclusion is that since health promotion is difficult to define, existing teacher tasks are labelled as health promotion. Everything (and nothing?) in the teaching profession becomes health promotion. This begs the question why SHPs, national guidelines and legislation is necessary if everything is health promotion?

However, the teacher also come across as incapable of performing this central, everyday pedagogical task without the help of the SHS. Is health promotion too much to ask for in the already pressured work environment of teachers? Should the Swedish teacher training focus more on providing future teachers with health promoting tools?

Or, another conclusion is that regular teaching done well *is* health promotion and no special programs or training is necessary since teachers are already promoting student health through every day teaching. The teachers then do not need to doubt their competence since health promotion and teaching go hand in hand. If teachers are given the time and resources to carry out their job well, health in students will be promoted.

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