The Language of Health-Promoting Schools in Aotearoa New Zealand

It is argued that a clear definition and consistent use of words will develop an understanding of this movement that aims to identify and address school health issues.

The idea of Health-Promoting Schools is relatively new to New Zealand - it dates from 1997, when the funding authority of the time, North Health, set up a pilot initiative in Auckland and Northland. The idea came to New Zealand ready-made, with its own descriptive language based on experiences from other countries where Health-Promoting Schools have been established since the early 1990s.

However, despite the time it has been operating, it is apparent that the language used to describe Health-Promoting Schools is not always consistent and is sometimes downright confusing. I argue that we should take the opportunity in Aotearoa New Zealand to agree on a clear and consistent set of particular words and phrases relating to the concepts of Health-Promoting Schools. If we can do this and adopt a common language which everyone understands, the benefits will be a reader acceptance of the concept of Health-Promoting Schools, and an increased likelihood of growth and sustainability of the movement as more schools adopt this way of thinking and working.

The Language of Health-Promoting Schools

We have all been in situations where people use jargon we don’t entirely understand, leaving us feeling confused and excluded. I have been concerned that in the Health-Promoting Schools movement, people are already falling into the trap of using confusing and excluding people in this way. It is too easy to use words and phrases in such a way that the meaning, while obvious to us, is anything but obvious to those hearing about Health-Promoting Schools for the first time. This is of course a very undesirable situation: if people find the messages about Health-Promoting Schools hard to understand, they are much less likely to be convinced and become involved.

The term 'Health-Promoting Schools'

Increasing numbers of people working with schools and health professionals will be familiar with the term 'Health-Promoting Schools'. Some of us will use it on a daily basis, and more will have heard of or seen it in writing. But what does it mean? Does it mean the same as 'Health Schools'? I argue that it does not; that a 'Health-Promoting School' is more than simply a healthy school. To understand why the term 'Health-Promoting School' is fundamentally different to 'Healthy School' it is relevant to look at the history of these terms and the ideas they describe.

The term 'Healthy School'

The term 'Healthy School' came from the World Health Organisation in the late 1980s. It was part of a new approach to public health, a way of working with people in particular communities to improve health. The idea was that when the setting was a prison, a city, a hospital or a school, the community in that setting could be encouraged to identify its particular health issues and to then find ways to address them. Indeed, this is the essence of health promotion - encouraging a community to identify issues of concern and find ways of making changes for the better to improve their own health, rather than having health professionals tell them what the health issues are and what they should be doing about them.

The Health-Promoting Schools Approach

Now, in this approach, a Health-Promoting School is one that involves the whole school community in identifying issues of concern related to health and then finds ways of addressing these issues. And importantly, the difference between Health-Promoting Schools and schools that regard themselves as 'Healthy Schools' in the Health-Promoting Schools adopt an ongoing, continuing process to identify issues of concern and then systematically and deliberately deal with them.

It's useful to have a definition and there are many for Health-Promoting Schools, but I particularly like this one from Queensland Health Education:

- "A health promoting school is one that works in a way which demonstrates a whole school commitment to improving and protecting the health and well-being of the school community. More specifically, a health promoting school is one that uses a health promoting school approach. A health promoting school cannot be defined by the presence of special projects, educational activities or of specific physical characteristics. Nor is it a program with a beginning or an end."

- "Queensland Health Education, 2001, Textbook 1, p.12"

So, having established that the term 'Health-Promoting School' has a very specific meaning, I want to look more closely at the term itself.