

Engaging Student Voices in School Health Knowledge Translation and Dissemination Student Workshop

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Background

The Comprehensive School Health Research Group (CSHR) at the University of Prince Edward Island received a “Meeting, Planning, and Dissemination” grant from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) to host a student workshop to share and discuss with the students information regarding school health. Twenty-eight students participated in the full day workshop held on October 5, 2011. Students in grades 7-12 represented fourteen schools from all three school boards.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of the workshop was to share school health information with students, but to also learn from the students what their priorities were concerning youth health and hear how they wanted to learn about this information. There were two objectives of the workshop:

- To engage students in thinking about health priorities and the influences that create a healthy school environment.
- To identify ways to disseminate school health knowledge to students, within and outside of schools.

The students participated in a variety of small group exercises and large group discussions and presentations. The students were also presented with results from the 2008/09 SHAPES/YSS-PEI survey that a majority of the students had participated in the previous year. This report details the information that resulted from the small and large group discussions.

*** Please note that a general overview of the workshop can be found on the Comprehensive School Health Research Group's website: www.upei.ca/cshr/2011*

Welcome

Dr. Brandi Bell, Comprehensive School Health Research Group – UPEI, welcomed the students and introduced the research team and each student then introduced him/herself before participating in a short icebreaker to start the morning.

School Health Priorities and Influences

For the first activity, the students were broken down into five pre-determined groups so that the groups consisted of students from different schools, but similar grade levels. Three of the groups were each made up of 4-5 junior high students (grades 7-9) and two groups each consisted of 5-6 high school students (grades 10-12).

The purpose of the first activity was to examine school health priorities and influences. This was approached by applying the Socio-Ecological Model framework. This model not only examines the factors that influence the individual, but also the relationships and the influences that exist between the individual and other levels within his/her environment and how those

levels interact with each other¹. Although the exact names of the levels may vary, there are five levels that are commonly utilized and were applied for the first activity. The Socio-Ecological Model can be viewed as a form of concentric circles with the individual in the centre and moving outward from the individual the remaining four levels include family and friends, school environment, community, and society and culture. As one examines the influences and moves outward from the individual level to the outer circles of the community, and society and culture, the relationships between the individual and other levels become slightly more complex. Because of this, the two older student groups (grades 10-12) were assigned to the two outer levels of community and society and culture, while the three younger student groups (grades 7-9) were assigned to either the individual, family and friends, or school environment level. Each student group was assigned a level and responded to the same three questions, with slight variation based on the specific level. The activity was designed to help gain a better understanding of students' perceptions on how the various levels can influence their behaviour, and how students can influence behaviours or actions at each of the levels.

Question 1:

The first group of questions asked the students what it means to be healthy and what the various players at each level are currently doing to help youth be healthy or engage in healthier behaviours.

Individual Level

What does it mean to be healthy?

- To be healthy is to feel good about how you look.
- To be able to participate in sports without getting winded.
- To be able to choose healthy foods for your life.
- To have a high self esteem.
- To take care of yourself.

Family and Friends Level

What do your family or friends do to help you be healthy or to create a healthy environment for you?

- Our parents buy healthy foods (fruits and vegetables, etc.).
- Our parents encourage us to be active, to join sports teams, play outside, eat healthy, etc.
- They discourage bad eating habits, etc.
- Some families don't go out to eat often and instead have home cooked meals including vegetarian and gluten free options.
- Our families and friends help us have a good self-esteem.

School Environment Level

What does your school do to help you be healthy or to create a healthy environment for you?

- Our school has many sports teams, intramurals, and opportunities for physical education.
- Cafeteria specials that give various healthy options including selling milk.
- Through the younger grades, teachers ensure students engage in proper hand washing.
- Teachers teach us about healthy eating.

¹ Emmons, K. (2000). Health behaviours in a social context. In L. Berkman & I. Kawachi (Eds.), *Social epidemiology* (pp. 242-266). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Community Level

What does your community do to help you be healthy or to create a healthy environment for you?

- Provides access to gyms, rec centres, sports fields, swimming pools, skateboard parks, etc.
- Rinks offer free skates, family skates, etc.
- Offer running groups (some communities have weekly runs with cash prizes) and fitness classes such as Zumba.
- There are bike lanes and sidewalks in some communities, which encourage students to bike and walk, rather than get a drive.
- Parks provide various opportunities to be active.
- Provide daycares in the community.
- Brookvale winter park is available for skiing, snowshoeing, and sledding.
- Workplaces offer gym memberships, passes to athletic facilities, golf green fees, etc.
- A new high school was built specifically outside of town away from downtown and fast food options.
- If the particular environment doesn't feel safe people won't access and make use of it.

Society and Culture Level

What does society and culture do to help you be healthy or to create a healthy environment for you?

- Facebook advertising is a great way for society to help us be healthier. There are a lot of exercise groups you can join online.
- Shows us different commercials promoting healthy choices such as yoga, healthy eating, go!PEI, and BodyBreak; commercials that promote eating eggs.
- Promotes sports that may inspire us to become more fit.
- There is an increase in shows for younger children that encourage them to move around, dance, and be active.
- There has been a culture shift towards smoking prevention including restrictions for advertisements and television shows, and increased advertisements for prevention and cessation.
- Promotes the healthier fast food option such as Subway.
- There are also advertisements though that promote less healthy options such as McDonalds and those ads appear to outnumber those for healthier options.

Summary: Overall, the students spoke positively of the various ways that players within the different levels of the model are supporting youth in living healthy or making healthy choices. There are several initiatives and current practices that are promoting physical activity and healthy eating including healthy food options in school cafeterias, parents cooking healthy meals, communities offering free skates in arenas and weekly runs with prizes. Students also feel that there has been a culture shift within the media where there are more advertisements promoting physical activity and healthy eating, as well as those that demonstrate the consequences of smoking. They also point out, however, that advertisements promoting unhealthy behaviours are still more common.

Question 2:

The second group of questions asked what could be done within the various levels to help youth live healthier.

Individual Level

What do you do to be healthy?

- To be healthy, students run, walk, play sports outdoors, etc.
- Participate in and promote school and community activities.
- Choose healthy food options and don't eat a lot of junk food.
- Students try not to dwell on bad things and look for the positive in every situation.
- Believe in yourself.
- Get enough sleep.
- Live a stress free life, prioritize your time, and spend quality time with friends and family.

Family and Friends Level

What could your family or friends do to help you live healthier/make healthier choices?

- Have home cooked meals instead of eating out.
- Involve other families and friends in your family's activities and share healthy food/ideas – encourages them to change behaviour by showing them the healthy options.
- Encourage friends to join sports teams and recognize friends' abilities.
- Parents could place a time limit on electronics use.
- Encourage you to do healthy things.
- Organize healthy events to do each week and make it as fun as possible.

School Environment Level

What could your school do to help you live healthier/make healthier choices?

- Promote healthier foods, make healthy options less expensive, and limit unhealthy options.
- Offer more sports in a greater variety including non-competitive as well as competitive teams.
- Have hand sanitizer dispensers in schools.
- Increase the number of student clubs related to anti-bullying, self-esteem, guidance, charity, community, etc.
- Respect, Accept, Protect (RAP) team goes to different schools to talk about bullying and being nice to others.
- Purple committee promotes gay rights, and teachers put up rainbow stickers to promote acceptance.
- People helping People committee hosts activities like soup kitchens, which are open to all individuals within the school and community.
- Encourage non-athletes to try out for teams or participate in different physical activities.
- Sometimes PA announcements focus only on the school's athletes placing them on a pedestal, which makes it seem that being on a team is unrealistic for the average student.

Community Level

What could your community do to help you live healthier/make healthier choices?

- Plan more community events.
- The province could commit more funding to small communities.
- Reduce construction and traffic and promote environmentally friendly activities, which could include increased bike lanes and sidewalks to encourage physical activity.
- Offer more funding for sports and increased availability for children and youth.
- Build outdoor fitness facilities in parks (e.g. Miscouche).
- Increase the number of healthy options when eating out.
- Increase awareness through media and commercials.

- Organize picnic socials with healthy food samples, cooking classes at grocery stores, and community potlucks.

Society and Culture Level

How could society and culture be better at helping you to live healthier/make healthier choices?

- Make gym memberships cheaper, and more accessible.
- School sports should be free.
- School sports teams should eat healthy after games; it defeats the purpose of being active if teams are stopping at Wendy's on the way home.
- Government shouldn't tax healthy foods, but should increase taxes on unhealthier foods.
- Provide more outdoor family activities.
- Advertise more healthy products.
- Governments should help families pay for activities.
- Kid friendly snacks should be healthier and taste good (move away from dunkaroos, fruit rollups, etc.).
- Competitions such as the Canada Games, encourages participation and also creates goals youth can aspire to reach.
- "Meals to Go" options at schools do provide better options and are convenient, but are always more expensive than hot food options and require a longer wait in line.

Summary: Although the students spoke positively about the current actions and initiatives that are helping them live healthier, they were aware that more could be done. The students discussed the continuation of current actions such as picking the healthier food option at restaurants and in the cafeteria and limiting their own intake of junk food. The students recognized that one of the major barriers to healthy eating for them is not convenience, but instead is the cost of the healthier option compared to cheaper, unhealthy food choices. Communities should also continue to build facilities that support physical activity and media needs to increase the number of health promotion advertisements, as advertisements for fast food outnumber those for healthy food. Communities could host picnic socials where local healthy food can be sampled and people can get to know each other in their neighbourhood. Students also felt that there needs to be an increased number of clubs and organizations that support mental fitness, such as anti-bullying and gay rights, within schools and communities. Government should provide more financial support for families who are unable to afford participating in physical activity.

Question 3:

The final round of questions focused on how each individual youth could influence the various levels to create healthier environments.

Individual Level

How could you be healthier?

- Get involved in more physical activities; join more teams, clubs, drama clubs, etc.
- Put an effort into things we do, and be positive.
- Create a work out plan, as you're more likely to be physically active if following a plan.
- Increase the number of healthier items on grocery list.
- Invest time and money into a particular activity and try to find help if needed.
- Need to be self motivated to make healthier choices.
- Students have to have a good self-image (you are not a loser); people like people who like themselves.

Family and Friends Level

How could you influence your family or friends to make healthier choices?

- If you learned something at school such as the Canada Food Guide, you can share that information with your family.
- Help your parents shop for groceries by pointing out or asking for the healthier food options.
- When participating in different physical activities such as Zumba, ask if a family member wants to come along.
- If you set examples for your friends chances are they will imitate you.
- Choose the healthier fast food option.
- Organize days where you eat certain foods, which can also include theme nights with your family (Italian night).

School Environment Level

How could you influence your school to make it healthier?

- Initiate sports clubs or groups for less popular sports such as girls' football, tennis, wrestling, archery, lacrosse, etc.
- Make use of a suggestion box and have them in every classroom.
- Start a petition to get more healthy foods, activities, etc. at your school.
- Use posters to promote healthy eating and physical activity at school.
- Have student run snack programs.
- Encourage the younger grades at Consolidated schools to make healthier choices starting from a young age.
- Organize walk to school days to encourage active transportation (have teachers and parent volunteers included).

Community Level

How could you influence your community to make it healthier?

- Start a petition for more funding from the government.
- Use Facebook to create groups and promote events.
- Set a good example for others in the community, get involved, go out and get active, need to practice what you preach so that others will listen to you.
- Start a committee and use community newsletters to promote events/share information.
- Plant community vegetable gardens.
- Organize community potlucks.
- Make use of summer camp facilities that are located in the community. Facilities can be used for physical activities and community events.

Society and Culture Level

How could you influence society and culture to make it healthier?

- Get a group of local people to make a video of healthy living and post it on the internet or show it on television.
- Address the government about lowering taxes/prices on healthier food options.
- Advertise the truth about what can happen if you don't change your unhealthy habits.
- The life span of youth today is shorter than our parents' if we continue eating the way youths are currently.

Summary: The students had a variety of ideas of ways they could influence actors and aspects in the different levels of the model to help promote health. Starting with themselves, youth have to have a good self-image and need to invest effort, time, and money in living healthier. Youth can share what they learned at school with their family and friends by inviting another family over to cook a healthy meal together or organizing activities at the local park. Students can also take an active role at school by organizing walk to school days to promote active transportation, and run snack programs. Facebook can be used by students to promote healthy living or community events and the government can be targeted to address the cost of healthy options by lowering taxes/prices. Overall, students recognized that in order to have influence at any of the levels of the model, the students themselves, first and foremost, have to engage in healthy living. They have to motivate themselves to live healthy and be a positive role model for their friends and family, students and staff in their schools, members in their communities, and society as a whole. Students have to set a good example for others by choosing the healthy options, engaging in physical activity, and having a high level of self esteem.

SHAPES/YSS-PEI Data Challenge

While in their original groups, the students participated in a SHAPES/YSS-PEI data challenge where some of the 2008-09 provincial survey results were shared with the students. The information shared included students' responses to questions about their physical activity, healthy eating, mental fitness, and smoking behaviours. Before providing the students with the specific results, they were asked what they thought the various percentages would be. In the groups, the students tried to determine logically what the answer was based on people they knew in their school who engaged in the particular behaviours or not. For a majority of the questions, the students assumed the results were worse than the data showed. For example, based on students they knew who smoked in their school, they thought that the current provincial smoking rate was a lot higher than it actually was. This activity encouraged students to consider their own perceptions of PEI students' healthy and unhealthy behaviours, while informing them about some of the results of surveys they were likely to have participated in. The SHAPES/YSS-PEI team and other researchers may wish to further explore using this format to engage students (and others) with the survey results, and to learn more about perceptions and beliefs regarding student and school health in PEI.

Discussion of Knowledge Dissemination

For the afternoon activity, students created their own groups so that each group had a mix of students from all grades and schools. There were five groups created with 5-6 students in each group. The purpose of the activity was to have the students design a type of program or activity that would target a health behaviour that was of concern to them, describe how the activity would run; and explain how the students would recruit others to participate. The students designed a variety of programs that mainly focused on healthy eating or physical activity within the school. Some groups found it difficult to determine an issue that was a priority to the whole group because the students represented different grades and schools. However, based on what they had learned during the data challenge, and what was going on at their individual school, all groups were able to set a priority that the entire group agreed was of concern at his/her school.

Group 1 – Girls and Boys Weeks

Priority: Getting students involved in different activities.

Activity: Dedicate separate weeks for boys and girls to participate in activities of their choice. Suggestion boxes can be used for students to suggest activities in which they may be interested

in participating. The students can then vote on the activity they prefer to do that week. The activity would take place during lunch or silent reading period. Some activities could include: sports, yoga, Zumba or UFIT, musical groups, self-confidence related activities, etc. Students, teachers, and parents could all be involved in organizing and participating in the activities.

Promotion: The activity would be promoted through newsletters, the school webpage, a Facebook page, signs in classes and hallways, PA announcements, and an activity board. The students would also wear school colours to support teams during the activity week and student assemblies would be used to promote the activities.

Group 2 – Unhealthy Cafeteria Food

Priority: Unhealthy food served in the cafeteria.

Activity: Encourage students to eat better through a variety of activities. Nutritionists would be involved in health classes as well as cooking classes. A hot lunch program would be made available with home cooked meals prepared by parents or other volunteers as well as students in home economics classes. Food guide posters would be posted throughout the school and there would be fruit trays available to students in the cafeteria.

Promotion: Newsletters and PA announcements would be used to share healthy eating information. Student discount cards would be made available for locations close to school that offer healthy foods. Sponsors, such as go!PEI, would come into the schools and promote healthy eating with a booth, healthy food samples, and healthy eating contests with prizes for the winners.

Group 3 – Balance of Activities Throughout the Day

Priority: Students don't have enough opportunities to be physically active throughout the day.

Activity: There will be a variety of activities throughout the day to increase students' physical activity levels and to help students and teachers have a better understanding of the need to be active. Activities will be for both the students and teachers. Teachers will be educated on the importance of physical activity for their students and will be shown how to incorporate activity in class as part of the curriculum (i.e., nature walks in biology class). Five minutes will be taken from each period to create another period where students will be able to be physically active. Sporting equipment will be allowed to be used before school and, when possible, classes will be taken outside. Also, participation in a sport before or after school will be part of the curriculum. Physical Education classes will be optional to students, but only if they are already signed up for another type of physical activity outside of school.

Promotion: PA announcements, newsletters, and posters will be used to promote activities including free events offered within the community. There will be awards ceremonies to celebrate and recognize the students with the most hours of physical activity. Students will have to be monitored by an adult who will have to sign a form acknowledging the student was active for a particular time period.

Group 4 – Increase Awareness and Create Incentives for Physical Activity

Priority: Lack of students participating in physical activity.

Activity: In order to encourage students who wouldn't traditionally participate in different types of physical activity, an incentive program would be created. There would also be an awareness

component, as some students might be completely unaware of activities or facilities available to them that provide opportunities to be active. Students would collect points for time spent being active. It would be stressed that these activities should extend outside of competitive teams and can include other activities such as intramurals, making use of an auxiliary gym, squash courts, and racquetball courts, as well as other sports clubs. The points collected would go towards a monthly reward program and would accumulate throughout the whole school year.

Promotion: The points system, activities, and facilities available would be promoted through student-made posters that are funny in order to get the attention of other students. PA announcements would also be utilized and teachers would promote and encourage students to participate as well.

Group 5 – Invent Different Games for Intramurals

Priority: Lack of students participating in physical activity.

Activity: Different games will be used to attract a variety of students to participate in physical activity. Using different activities will target the students who do not traditionally participate in sports. All grades in the school will be involved with specific times devoted to particular grades. A suggestion box will be used to allow students to suggest ideas for intramural activities.

Promotion: Activities will be promoted through posters and PA announcements. Sign-up sheets will be located throughout the school. Activity organizers will walk from class to class to get other students excited about participating.

Summary: Most of the students' activity ideas were focused on physical activity and healthy eating, although the specific activity varied between groups. A few groups focused on low physical activity participation, but within that particular behaviour students had different specific priority areas. One group considered the different participation levels between genders while another group tried to target those students who generally do not participate in team sports. All groups recognized the importance in including a variety of people in organizing and running the different activities. All the groups included other students, teachers, parents, community members and other volunteers as individuals who could help support the activity. They saw that partnership between multiple individuals was necessary in order to have a successful activity. The students also felt that it made a big difference in student participation in the activities if they were led and promoted by students. They agreed that they would be more likely to participate if other students had organized the activity and were promoting it. Students find it easier to understand when other students explain how things will work rather than when adults, such as teachers or principals, explain the activity.

Closing

Following completion of the Knowledge Dissemination activity, students were thanked for their attendance and participation and were invited to attend the Youth Excel Provincial Forum² (held on October 12, 2011) with other invited parents and youth health stakeholders³.

² The purpose of the second Youth Excel Provincial Forum was to focus on the progress that had occurred since the initial Provincial Forum held in November 2010, and to discuss next steps for continuing to collaborate on and sustain youth health activities in PEI school communities.

³ Thirteen of the 28 students attended the Provincial Forum on October 12, 2011 and one student shared her workshop experiences with the Forum participants.

Feedback

Feedback from the workshop was overwhelmingly positive. Prior to arriving and participating, students were a little unsure about what to expect, but afterwards many spoke positively about their experience. They felt it was well planned and organized. The students really appreciated the opportunity to share their opinion and to be heard. One student stated, "I hope that some of the ideas/activities that we came up with today will eventually get into the school systems. I applaud you in your effort to make schools across the island healthier environments for students and staff." The students enjoyed hearing what activities were currently taking place in other schools and they learned ideas they could take back to their own school and share with their principal and teachers, fellow students, and parents. After the workshop, one student sent an email describing how she enjoyed the workshop experience and she thanked the research group for taking the time to speak to the students and ask their opinions. She also indicated that she had already spoken to her principal about ideas she learned at the workshop that she wanted to incorporate into her school.

Recommendations

Based on the students' perspectives and responses to questions asked, several recommendations regarding engaging students in school health knowledge exchange were identified.

- Students really want to be heard and actually have their thoughts and opinions taken seriously and acted upon. This can be achieved simply through casual conversations with the students.
- Similar to the first recommendation, students want to have better relationships with teachers, principals, and other school staff, so that they feel comfortable approaching those individuals if they have a problem or want to talk about an idea.
- Students want to be involved in decisions, especially if the decisions concern the students themselves.
- Students are more willing to participate in activities and be engaged if the activities are led and promoted by their peers.

From the opinions the students shared on how the actors within the various levels influence their behaviours, and the healthy activities they created, it's clear that the students do not have unrealistic expectations. They understand that it takes a variety of resources including personal and financial support, to support healthier choices and environments. Healthy school and community environments will be better achieved by involving teachers, principals, parents, community members, as well as students, in conversations and planning activities focused on school health.

Next Steps

Data collection for SHAPES-PEI occurs biennially with the CSHR group engaging in knowledge exchange during the interim year. As part of the knowledge exchange year of 2011-2012, the CSHR group has been and will continue to meet with various stakeholders to share and discuss SHAPES-PEI results from the previous data collection years. These groups include, but are not

limited to: government departments, NGO's, school boards, and administrators, teachers, students and parents of individual schools. Knowledge gained from the workshops will be incorporated into the various knowledge exchange activities.

Also, information/fact sheets for both parents and students will be developed based on feedback gained from the student and parent workshops, as well as lessons learned from implementing SHAPES-PEI and the School Health Grant.

Appendix

Lessons Learned

Several lessons emerged throughout the workshop planning process. Although information from the SHAPES/YSS-PEI survey was shared with the students, not all of the students represented schools that had participated in the survey the previous year. It was decided (as part of the recruitment strategy) that the student workshop presented a great opportunity to engage schools and students who did not participate in SHAPES/YSS-PEI the previous year. The CSHR Group felt that, for those schools, nominating students to participate in a workshop would be seen as less time consuming and burdensome than implementing the SHAPES/YSS-PEI survey. Also, by targeting those schools that did not participate in SHAPES/YSS-PEI, there was less focus on the schools who had participated before; as a result, it was possible to reduce the demands placed on schools with which we had already built a positive relationship. In the end, several schools that did not participate in the survey did nominate students to participate in the workshop.

There were several factors that influenced the actual date of the workshop, which led to some time constraints during the recruitment procedure. The ideal date for the workshop was before the Youth Excel Provincial Forum so that students could participate in both, and so that workshop results could be shared at the Forum. Because of scheduling conflicts and funding restrictions, the Provincial Forum was set for October 12, 2011, with the workshop occurring sometime before that date. October 5, 2011 was chosen so as to give as much time as possible for coordinating the workshop and recruiting students. However, due to delays with the ethical procedure, the initial contact with the schools was later than planned, which left a shorter amount of time to contact principals, receive student names, send out information letters and consent forms, and to receive the signed consent forms. Also, as the workshop date got closer and there were still spots available for student participants, schools that weren't included originally in the recruitment process were contacted and asked to nominate students.

Initially, the principal of the school was the individual asked to nominate students to participate. In some circumstances this was not the best option. Recruitment occurred within the first couple of weeks of the school year, which is an extremely busy time for schools, especially principals. While most principals contacted were able to nominate students, a better approach could have included contacting school guidance counsellors, nurses, health teachers, or Physical Education teachers (particularly those who previously acted as a school contact person during the SHAPES/YSS-PEI survey). Some principals mentioned conferring with those individuals before submitting students' names, or in some cases, they asked those individuals to nominate students themselves. University nursing students who were doing a clinical placement in some of the schools were also great resources.

Although students represented schools from across the Island, there was concern from some principals that it would be difficult to get the students to and from Charlottetown. If a student were to drive themselves, school policy doesn't allow students to drive with other students, which made it difficult to recruit students from farther away. This was especially difficult for students who were unable to drive, as they had to rely on a parent to drive to Charlottetown and remain in the area for the duration of the workshop. Travel complications made it hard to recruit students from some schools. If a similar workshop were to be held in the future, it would be beneficial to have several workshops in multiple locations across the Island to be more accessible for students.