

CONCERNING BEARS, TIGERS AND ELEPHANTS : AN  
EXPLORATION OF HEALTH EDUCATION IN ACT SCHOOLS

BY

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*"There is something special about this  
course in that it helps your life on  
the right track."*

Yr 8 Student

*"Our group has gone back to being a  
classroom with a teacher."*

Yr 10 Student

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ABSTRACT

This study presents an evaluation of health education in schools in the Australian Capital Territory, listing as evidence the perceptions and experiences of students and teachers at three levels of schooling. There is a particular emphasis on the high school. First, a broad-based literature review was undertaken, in order to arrive at some theoretical principles for health education. For the evaluation itself a combination of methods has been used including student questionnaires, teacher interviews, group discussion, participant observation and analysis of documents. While the questionnaire was the major research tool, all sources are integrated in the final discussion in order to provide a broad picture of health education at the different school levels.

Conclusions drawn from the review of literature include (i) that contemporary health education in the Western world is concerned with the quality of life and with the decisions, at both individual and community levels, which relate to lifestyle, and (ii) the inevitability of social change had led to the recognition in the United Kingdom, United States of America and Australia of the need for young people to develop strategies for coping with a changing environment. In Australian Capital Territory schools, health education has been recognised as carrying the responsibility for developing these strategies. A key theme emerging from the review and explored in the evaluation is that, if these goals are to be achieved, particular emphasis must be placed on the process of learning and on the social emotional environment as an integral part of that process.

In order to explore this hypothesis information was collected on student and teacher perceptions of the above concepts of health education and how these differ in a range of schools. To this end six schools which positively identified health education as part of their curriculum were used as case studies. As individual

schools they were found to approach this in different ways and these different approaches build a broad picture of school health education in action. It was found however, that there were major difficulties in effectively incorporating contemporary health education in schools.

These difficulties repeat those already identified in my review of health education in Australian schools in this century. A "reaction pattern" of "band-aid" response to social change is repeatedly incorporated into the traditional education curriculum of the time under the title of health education.

In the present era, there can be identified a mismatch between the objectives of contemporary health education and the present educational paradigm. A major finding in this regard was the failure of the high school to match up either to needs of students or the ideals of health education. While the fulfilment of these ideals was shown to be possible given specific teacher qualities, it was also found to be inhibited by a range of environmental factors. Examples of these were found to be organisational barriers and staff and student pressure to conform to the established structure and to the established roles. The study highlights the frustrating position of the teacher who seeks, or is given, the task of implementing contemporary health education in present-day schools.

CONTENTS

	Page
Acknowledgements	i
Abstract	ii
List of Figures	vi
List of Tables	x
List of Appendices	xiii
Abbreviations	xiv

## SECTION ONE: FOREWORD

SECTION TWO : EXPLANATION : LITERATURE REVIEW  
AND CLARIFICATION OF TERMS

CHAPTER 1: Health as Quality of Life	12
CHAPTER 2: Education and a New Paradigm	26
CHAPTER 3: Health Education as Action	39
CHAPTER 4: Health Education in Schools	49
CHAPTER 5: A Rationale for Contemporary Health Education in Schools	61

SECTION THREE : IMPLEMENTATION : REVIEW AND EVALUATION  
OF HEALTH EDUCATION METHODS

CHAPTER 6: Health Education in the Classroom	72
CHAPTER 7: Allocation of Health Education in the Curriculum	79
CHAPTER 8: From Information to Behaviour Change	93

CHAPTER 9: Climate or Atmosphere	105
CHAPTER 10: Three Classroom Strategies	114
SECTION FOUR : EXPLORATION : REVIEW AND EVALUATION OF HE IN ACT SCHOOLS	
CHAPTER 11: Method of Investigation	128
CHAPTER 12: Results	162
Part A: Background - Setting and Curriculum	163
Part B: Foreground - Reactions from Inside the School and the Classroom	196
CHAPTER 13: Integration of Results	251
SECTION FIVE : CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION	303
POSTSCRIPT	330
BIBLIOGRAPHY	332
APPENDICES	346