

Nutrition education policy and education programmes for kindergarten and primary schools in The Netherlands

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In 1972 The Netherlands' Ministers of Public Health and of Education were strongly advised to formulate a health education policy and to start health education programmes for kindergarten and primary schools. Since then working groups, workshops and conferences were held to formulate objectives for a health-education policy and vast amounts of research money became available to study the content of such programmes and to evaluate the potential health benefits. It is not surprising that nutritionists became involved in health education right from the start. Leadership in the field of health education in the schools was shown by a team at Nijmegen University, Medical Faculty/Department of Social and Preventive Dentistry. At the end of the 1970s a new law for primary education was being formulated. One of the issues in this law is that each school should make a detailed school curriculum on which the law gives major outlines. One of these major outlines is that health education should be in the curriculum. In the first draft of the law, health education was formulated in general terms as the promotion of healthy behaviour. It included no specification on nutrition. At that moment the Nutrition Council put pressure on the Minister of Education to include a specification on nutrition in the paragraph dealing with health education. Notwithstanding this pressure, nothing changed in the general formulation of health education. The law was accepted in Parliament in 1981 and will become operational in 1985.

At the same time as the new law on primary education was in preparation, the Minister of Public Health asked the Nutrition Council to formulate advice on what a healthy dietary pattern for the Dutch population should look like and how it could be promoted. The Nutrition Council decided that nutrition education in primary schools is one of the ways to promote healthy food habits. As a consequence it formulated advice that was published in November 1982, on the principles of nutrition education in primary schools. The main points of this advice are:

1. The best way for a systematic elaboration of nutrition education is an elaboration within the framework of health education.
2. The aim of nutrition education in primary schools is formulated as promoting a conscious healthy behaviour. It is stressed that it is not health instruction.

3. The objective of nutrition education can best be met by those teaching methods and materials that concentrate on learning to make one's own choice independently.
4. Within the framework of nutrition education the following factors that have an influence on nutrition behaviour or on the relationship between nutrition and health play an important role: cultural, social, physiological, psychological, economical and technological factors.

Before the objective (nutrition education as part of health education in every primary school in The Netherlands) is realized much has to be done and some problems have to be solved. First, the schools have to be made aware that nutrition education is a real part of health education and they should be stimulated to include it in their programme. Next to this is the training of the teachers. Health education and nutrition education are to be included in the curriculum of the training colleges for teachers, and postgraduate courses are to be organized. A very important part also is the teaching material. At the moment there is already a wide range of materials that can be used. These materials should be checked on the principles of the advice of the Nutrition Council. Also there will be a need for developing new materials. This raises the question of how to evaluate the materials. The problem in this respect is the selection of the right criteria for evaluation. Concerning the teaching materials there is the problem of identity. At the moment the materials come from different institutions with different philosophies (curriculum development institutions, educational institutions, commodity boards, industry). The question is whether this causes problems because of the diversity. The advice of the Nutrition Council suggests that the way nutrition education is given is dependent on the principles of education of the individual schools. This opens the way for many different teaching materials and poses the serious question of co-ordination.

Health education and nutrition education are more than just subjects on the curriculum of a school. They concern more than just pupils and teachers. Two important groups which have to be included as well are the parents and the school health services. Although it is the philosophy of health education to include the parents, the way this can be done is rarely discussed or studied. After all, it is at home that the child receives the food and it is not known in what way nutrition education of the children can influence food buying and food preparation practices of parents. It is also of great importance that the school health service is in line with the health education programmes in the schools. This may mean that health service personnel should be instructed in health education strategies and especially on the role of nutrition in it.

Finally some words on the role of the nutritionist with respect to nutrition education in primary schools. Nutrition education, especially in primary schools, is a joint effort of two disciplines: nutrition and didactics. These two disciplines together should develop strategies and materials. The nutritionist provides his knowledge on nutrition and food-habits. The didactician has knowledge on the

right approach of the different levels in the school and what educational methods are suitable to meet the principles of nutrition and health education. In The Netherlands we have wide experience with such multi-disciplinary teams.

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