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Save the Children



REVIEW OF SCHOOL CURRICULA ON HEALTH TOPICS IN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE PROJECT “SHKOLLAT PËR SHËNDETIN”

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

In March 2021, Save the Children started the implementation of the main phase of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) Project: “Shkollat për Shëndetin”.

The aim of the Project is to promote healthy behavioural practices and healthy lifestyle habits in the Albanian population, with a particular focus on schoolchildren (aged 6-16 years) in order to control and prevent effectively the major risk factors for non-communicable diseases (NCDs).

According to one of the outputs, the project aims at establishing an inter-sectoral working group for evaluation and reviewing of school curricula in all 9-year schools in Albania. The review of the main health-related disciplines (physical and health education, biology, and civic education) should assess the following topics: food and nutrition, physical activity, sexual and reproductive health, no use of substances (tobacco, alcohol, drugs), mental health and wellbeing, bullying including cyberbullying, injuries and child safety in general, domestic violence, hygiene and sanitation, waste management, and environmental health in general.

1.2. Context

In this context, in order to contribute to the achievement of project outcomes, an interdisciplinary group of leading experts was invited for reviewing the existing teaching curricula for children aged 6-16 years and identifying the gaps related to healthy nutrition, physical activity, substance abuse, sexual health, as well as considering inclusion of new elements into the teaching curricula such as COVID-19 control and prevention and environmental health in general (and waste management in particular).

Health education is an approach that involves the individual, different social groups, the community and the whole society as well. Its effects and results pass from the individual to the whole society. Health is closely linked with education because individual's physical, social, mental, emotional and spiritual growth and development depend on the social, physical, emotional environment of the family and community.

Since 2014, Albania is implementing the new competency-based curriculum in all levels of pre university education. The implementation of this new approach is being carried out in schools through using interactive and collaborative teaching strategies, creating safe and supportive physical and social environment, as well as fostering the school, parents and community partnerships.

“Shkollat për Shëndetin” project aims at creating a whole school approach which should be inclusive and sustainable in promoting health and building capacities in national, regional and international relevant institutions. Health promotion focuses on creating the necessary set of knowledge, attitudes and skills in order for each individual to lead a healthy life. The right knowledge ensures healthy behaviour and develops positive attitudes towards health education. Health Promoting Schools is closely connected with:

- *main theoretical knowledge* about health that need to be dealt with by teachers in basic education,
- *building individual values and beliefs* that support healthy behaviours,
- *setting group norms* that value healthy living styles,
- *developing the main healthy skills* which require consistent practices and behaviours.

2. Aim and Objectives

2.1. Aim of the Curricula Review

The aim of this work was to review the school curricula in Albania regarding health-related topics for the needs of the project “Shkollat për Shëndetin”. This work also includes a detailed analysis of curricula of other countries in the region, other relevant countries in Europe, USA and Canada in order to identify effective means, examples and strategies applied for promoting healthy schools all over the world. Part of this analysis also are the data and reports of UNESCO, OECD and Eurydice. The selection of the countries included in the analysis was based on three main factors: a) the annual hours and duration of the basic education in these countries; b) the positive and best experiences in promoting healthy schools; c) the similarities in school’s subjects taught in their curricula.

2.2. Specific Objectives

- To review the teaching curricula regarding health topics in the international educational systems (neighbouring countries with Albania, as well as other countries of the European region and beyond). In this report, it should be specified how the current international practices develop this component in their schools, in which subject, and the specific plan from the 1st grade to the 9th grade.
- To review the teaching curricula with a focus on healthy behaviours, of the subject/discipline: “primary education” in the 9-year school system in Albania.

- To review the teaching curricula with a focus on healthy behaviours of the subject/discipline: “biology-chemistry” and similar subjects in the 9-year school system in Albania from the 6th to the 9th grade.
- To review the teaching curricula with a focus on healthy behaviours of the subject/discipline: “civic education” in the 9-year school system in Albania from the 6th to the 9th grade.
- To identify, formulate and recommend specific and concrete actions and interventions for improvement of teaching curricula on healthy behaviours in the 9-year school system in Albania, that can be implemented in schools starting from September 2021 onward.

3. Methodology

The methodology for the review of school curricula on health topics in the framework of the project “Shkollat për Shëndetin” was designed in a way as to compare experiences, data and facts, analyse different educational contexts, reach into conclusions which in the future can be referred to and used by educational policy makers, educational institutions and national and international organizations interested in promoting healthy schools. The focus of this research was analysing in detail national and international resources which have been designed and developed by agencies responsible for and working with pre university education in their respective countries.

Secondary data analysis of core national and international curricula has been used in writing this review. National data have been collected from official educational documents in Albania such as: National Curriculum Framework of Pre-University Education in Albania, Core Curriculum of Pre-University Education in Albania, and relevant Subject Syllabuses. The official sites of UNESCO, OECD, Eurydice, which have been a reference point for Albania in drafting and implementing the competency-based curriculum, were consulted to gather data for different countries` curricula in the field of health education.

3.1. Review Approach

3.1.1. Review of curricula in Albania

To have a clear and deeper insight of the health topics in Albanian school curricula and related subject syllabuses the following documents were referred to and analysed:

- Primary Education
Subjects:
“Natural Sciences” – Grade 1-5
“Social Education”- Grade 1-2
“Physical Education, Sport and Health” Grade 1-5
- Lower Secondary Education
Subjects:
“Biology and Chemistry” - Grades 6-9
“Sociology” – Grade 3-9
“Physical Education, Sport and Health” Grade 6-9

The following documents have also been consulted to see how health related topics are dealt with in educational national policy in Albanian Pre-University Education.

- National Curriculum Framework of Pre-University Education in Albania;
- Core Curriculum for Pre-School and Primary Education;
- Core Curriculum for Lower Secondary Education;
- Levels of achievement from stage one to stage 4.

3.1.2. Review of international curricula

The group also reviewed international curricula. The working group decided to select those countries, Kosovo included, (a) which have similar educational systems with the Albanian one, (b) whose teaching plans are organised based on fields of study, (c) which have included health education topics in their curricula, (d) which promote healthy schools and best practices in the field of health education. The focus of the review of international curricula was to point out how (a) health related topics were part of school curricula and schools’ subjects, (b) learning outcomes and standards have been developed for each educational level, (c) healthy schools should be promoted, (d) to apply a whole school approach for health education, and (e) how to design effective health education syllabuses and curriculum.

3.2. Sources of information

The group used as reference, for curricula review and analysis on health-related topics, Albanian curriculum documents as well as curriculum materials of other European countries, USA, Canada etc. A full bibliography and sitography can be found in the review.¹

3.3. Data Analysis

As for data analysis, the following steps were taken:

- Review of Core Curriculum of Basic Education in Albania;
- Review of official curriculum and educational programs in regional and international level;
- Comparative analysis of national and international curricula for basic education
- Findings and recommendations.

4. Review Findings

4.1. Health topics in the official curriculum in Albania

In 2013-2014, Albania launched the pre-university educational reform for designing and implementing a new competency-based curriculum aiming at life-long learning. One of the seventh key competences of this curriculum is the **personal competence** which means enabling students live a healthy life. Other skills students gain throughout the school years are related to **healthy living habits, practices and behaviours**.

4.1.1. Nature Science and Biology

The nature science curriculum helps in building and strengthening those competences which support students grow and develop personally, socially, economically and are related to local, and global issues. These competences also contribute to mastering key competences which support students' lifelong learning.

Referring to stage 1 and 2, students' learning outcomes relate to **basic rules of personal and environmental hygiene, consumption of healthy food, prevention of food related illnesses, management of free time** practicing healthy sports and activities which contribute a better physical, mental and spiritual health.

¹ Rishikimi i kurrikulës së shkollave 9-vjeçare në lidhje me trajtimin e temave të shëndetit, në kuadër të projektit "Shkollat për Shëndetin"; Bibliography and Sitography- page 58 &59

In stage 3 and 4, in biology, the learning outcomes of the personal key competence relate to preparing **healthy food, food health benefits, daily healthy routine, consumption of healthy food, changes of puberty, effects and consequences of smoking** and other dangerous substances.

Analysing the nature science syllabuses in primary education, different topics related to health can be noticed such as:

Grade 1: (a) “**Diversity**” where students are introduced to healthy foods and drinks, focusing on a healthy diet, (b) “**Senses**” and how to use them to get to know the world, (c) “**Cycles**” which deals with human body growth and changes in different life cycles.

Grade 3: (a) “**Systems**” where students are introduced to life processes of living things, human senses and their functions; (b) the importance of physical activity and healthy diet in order to be healthy.

Grade 4: (a) “Body systems in animals and humans” where human skeleton is introduced.

Analysing the biology syllabuses in lower secondary education, different topics related to health can be noticed such as:

From grade 6 to grade 9: “**Systems**” which deals with the system of human body organs f.eg., **heart, lungs, digestive system, nervous system, reproductive system**. Information about the function of the human organs, the influence of food, and lifestyle and the use of drugs in the function of the human organs has been included.

Grade 7: “**Skeletal and muscular system**” of human body.

Grade 8: 90% of the syllabus covers topics on nutrition, digestive system, respiration system, and reproductive system. Nutrition mostly deals with a balanced food diet, malnutrition and its consequences. Topics on reproductive system introduce information about puberty, menstrual cycle, pregnancy, effects of drugs in reproduction and growth, HIV/SIDA/SST etc.

4.1.2. Physical and health education

“Physical education, sport and health” as a subject in pre university education in Albania, helps students develop the necessary knowledge, skills and values to ensure their wellbeing and good *physical, mental, emotional and social health* in order to successfully face the challenges of present and future life. This area of the Albanian curriculum is presented as an integrated approach of two subjects (1) physical education and sports, (2) and health education. Its focus is identifying healthy life styles, prevention and protection from diseases and their risks.

“Physical education, sport and health” aims at:

- *promoting* regular physical activity, educating a healthy and active life style, and strengthening competences for a successful future life.
- *introducing* the basic principles for giving first aid in cases of trauma during physical activity.

From grade 1 to grade 9, the three main areas of knowledge are (1) movement and traditional games, (2) gymnastics, and (3) athletics. The content of each area and the types of games differ from grade to grade. For example:

- **"Education in service of health, wellbeing and community"**, covered from class 1 to class 9, is closely connected with the education for healthy habits through living an active and healthy life style which contributes to the general wellbeing and physical, mental and emotional health.
- **"Healthy eating"** is a topic which is covered from grade 1 to grade 6.
- **"Preventing injuries during physical activities and protecting our body"** is a topic that can be found in all grades even though it might appear under different headings.
- **"The relationship between health and sports"** is covered in grade 3 and 4, **"The relationship between sports and society"** in grade 7, **"The relationship between health and family"** in grade 3, **"The relationship between health and society"** in grade 6, **"The relationship between health and environment"** in grade 2,4 and 8.
- **"Gender differences"** as a topic is covered in grade 6.
- The risks of using substances that cause dependence (addiction) are introduced in grade 6.

4.1.3. Civic education

In the curriculum area "Society and the Environment", students understand the way how humans can have a good mental, physical, intellectual health for their benefit and the benefit of their families and their social environment. They also learn about the connection between a healthy lifestyle and their personal growth. Table 10² in the review explains the learning outcomes of the personal competence for the "Civic Education" subject which promote social wellbeing, peaceful coexistence and conflict prevention and resolution.

From grade 1 to grade 9, the main topic covered is "The individual, social groups and society", which is further elaborated into dealing with relationships among the individual and various social groups, exploring different factors that influence these relationships, making decisions for attitudes and behaviours which contribute to a social peaceful coexistence.

² Table 10. Learning outcomes for the PERSONAL COMPETENCE (key competence) of the Civic Education for grades 1-9, page 81 in the review.

Another topic covered in this subject is “Culture” which explains how human beings (a) learn, create, share and adapt to cultures, (b) have different beliefs, experiences and reactions towards other people, happenings and events based on their viewpoints and values. In addition, students` wellbeing, habits and behaviours for a healthy lifestyle are part of the above topics.

4.2. Health topics in the international curricula

A healthy lifestyle is often mentioned by countries as one of the main aims of physical education at school. In addition, health and fitness are frequent activities as shown in Figure 2.2. Indeed, many countries include various aspects of health education in their teaching of other subjects, such as biology and social sciences.

The Eurydice report “**Physical Education and Sport at School in Europe**”, where about 40 European countries have been analysed and compared, states that a healthy lifestyle of students is one of the main aims of physical education at school. However, many countries include different aspects of health education in the teaching of other subjects, such as **biology** and **social sciences**.

A few countries offer health education as a mandatory stand-alone subject in their curricula. This applies to Cyprus and, in lower secondary education, to Ireland and Finland. In almost all other countries, health education is an integral part of other mandatory subjects. In the Czech Republic, schools can decide whether aspects of health education are taught as a standalone subject or as part of other subjects in lower secondary education.

In countries where health education is taught as a mandatory stand-alone subject, this occurs in at least one school year. In Romania for example health education is an optional subject in primary and lower secondary education at national level and schools can decide whether it is taught or not.

The following table summarises some of the health-related concepts and topics covered in the curricula of the countries in this review. These topics are not exhausted, and generally health education typically encompasses one or several of the following topics: physical, personal and social well-being; health and illness prevention; hygiene; safety; sexual health; food and nutrition; health and social harm (alcohol, tobacco and drugs abuse). Some countries have integrated these topics either in Biology or Physical Education, some others teach Health education as a standalone subject.

	Albania	Great Britain	Kosovo	Croatia	Chek Republic	USA	Canada	Finland	Northern Macedonia
Growth and physical changes	x				x			x	x
Food and nutrition	x	x	x	x	x	X	x	x	x
Physical activity	x	x	x		x		x	x	x
Sexual education and reproductive health	x	x			x		x	x	
Mental health and wellbeing	x	x	x		x	X	x	x	
Stress and its risks					x				
Healthy choices		x	x				x	x	
Environmental health			x					x	x
Control and prevention of health emergencies; first aid			x		x		x	x	
safety	x	x	x	x			x	x	
Risks of using dangerous substances	x	x	x	x	x	X	x	x	
Individual and personal health			x		x	X		x	
Hygiene	x	x	x	x	x				x

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1. Conclusions

1. Health education is an approach where the individual, social groups, community and the whole society are active contributors. Its effects, impact, results pass from the individual to the whole society.
2. Health is closely connected with education because physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual growth of the students depends directly on the physical, social and emotional environment in school, family and community.

3. Health promotion requires knowledge, attitudes and skills in order to lead a healthy life. Proper knowledge ensures healthy behaviour and develop positive attitudes towards each aspect of health education.
4. In some countries, health education is a mandatory stand-alone subject, in some others it is integrated in subjects such as physical education or natural subjects while in some other countries it is an optional subject is school curriculum.
5. For about 30 years, countries that are part of the “Healthy Schools” have developed numerous resource materials both for teaching and classroom use, as well as for teacher trainings.
6. International experience and practice show that health education is an approach that requires institutional cooperation, communication and collaboration between educational and health institutions, cooperation and understanding among the family, school, community and the whole society. It also asks for perseverance and hard work on the part of the school, encouragement and self-awareness of students to communicate their ideas and concerns and become promoters of healthy habits and behaviours.
7. The Albanian new curriculum has included health education topics mainly in three subjects which have been analysed in this review. Health topics are covered in the syllabuses of these three subjects. However, there is space for intervention in the syllabuses for a complete and better health education in Albanian schools.
8. All countries have included information about Covid-19 in their health education curriculums mainly about taking precaution and hygiene measures to prevent it. It is still a question whether to include this topic in the national curriculum or in the optional school curriculum.
9. Students use textbooks for subjects like “Natural Sciences”, “Civic Education”, “Biology”, and “Citizenship”. It is questionable whether these textbooks meet the aims of the above-mentioned subjects’ curricula in offering teachers the right methodology in treating the new knowledge through real life situations, thus helping students shape their knowledge and foster their skills and attitudes.
10. Students do not use textbooks for “Physical Education” subject. It is the teacher who is responsible for making sure that the syllabus is fully covered. There is need for further study to analyse if teacher fully cover health related topics and support students to better understand and promote healthy habits and behaviours.
11. Teacher training for implementing the competency-based curriculum is an ongoing process in Albania. The questions arise: How well trained are teachers of primary education,

biology, physical education, sociology to cover health related topics? Are these teachers trained to cover these topics in whole school-based approach? Are schools and their teaching and non-teaching staff trained to promote healthy schools?

12. A better and friendly school encourages teachers and students to benefit and have a qualitative and good physical, mental and social healthy life.

5.2. Recommendations

Health education, which is similar to the concept ‘life skills’ can be defined as the ability to understand oneself, the others and the surrounding world in a way that enables people to make significant decisions about their health. It also includes the ability to identify and address factors that have to do with health conditions and wellbeing of own selves and others.

5.2.1. Recommendations for children aged 6-16 (grades 1-9)

- **Healthy eating.** School environment is one of the main factors that ensures children access to a qualitative health education.
- **Physical activity.** Physical activity is an important component of each strategy which aims at addressing problems of children obesity and a sedentary lifestyle.
- **Prevention and effective treatment of “small” injuries.** Small injuries such as bruises, sprains, scratches, cuts, stings, burns etc., are common among young children and adolescents when playing or doing other physical activities either at home or elsewhere.
- **Safety.** Fires, gas leaking, electric discharges etc., often cause severe damage in places where children play or study. It is because of this reason that dealing with these cases and teaching students how to manage them is of great importance.
- **Oral hygiene.** Oral hygiene is of importance for every child because in most cases habits and behaviours that are formed during childhood last for all life.
- **Environment.** In order to control and prevent various threats to the environment, children, parents and community need to be aware of them.
- **Prevention of COVID-19.** The best way to prevent and slow down Covid-19 transmission is to continuously inform children about it and the ways it is spread.

5.2.2. Recommendations for students aged 13-16 (Grades 7-9)

- Students of grades 7-9, who are in the adolescence phase, need to be informed about smiley piercings, their risks, and infections they might cause.

- **Mental health.** Good mental health is very important for students' wellbeing. Anxiety and stress are among the common mental problems in adolescence.
- **Sexual and reproductive health.** Adolescents, especially girls who might have problems with unwanted pregnancy at an early age, should be informed and aware about sexual and reproductive health.
- **Smoking, alcohol, and drugs.** Young people are tempted to try smoking as they want to look cool, which later may become an unhealthy habit. Another reason for starting smoking is staying in smoking areas or being in company with people who smoke. The consumption of alcohol is another health problem in Albania. It might be fatal for the life of young people who are not aware of the risks and consequences. Drug abuse, especially the use of psychoactive substances, is also concerning as it may lead to social, physical, mental, emotional and behavioural problems.

5.2.3. Short-term recommendations³

1. Setting up a health promoting group in each school with representatives from students, parents and teachers;
2. Organizing health promoting activities and awareness campaigns;
3. Using all the opportunities to promote health in the framework of schools as community centres;
4. Creating a physical environment in schools to promote healthy behaviours to students (school yard, classroom, toilets);
5. Conducting a needs analysis (1) to identify the health problems that should be addressed among students, teachers and parents, (2) to design an action plan on how to better promote health and healthy behaviours, (3) to assess the program, activities and outcomes of the initiative "Shkollat për Shëndetin";
6. Drafting an action plan 2021-2026 based on the National Strategy of Education and Health;
7. Assigning a date per month in which schools organize physical activities and promote healthy eating and behaviours;
8. Designing and accrediting a well-structured teacher training program⁴.

³ The recommendations are planned to be carried out in three phases: short-term: within 3 years (2021-2023), mid-term, within 2026 and long-term, within 2030. However, the priorities can change depending on the supporting policies in education and health as well as on the international developments in these areas.

⁴ First phase: teachers are grouped according to the subject they teach (primary education, professional network) and are trained on the materials designed and created by the expert group. Second phase: The most active and best performing teachers

5.2.4. Mid-term recommendations

1. Designing the curriculum ⁵ which supports the philosophy of “Shkollat për Shëndetin”. Writing the syllabuses of health education for each grade/ stage of the curriculum;
2. Expanding the “Shkollat për Shëndetin” project to Upper Secondary Education and preparatory classes (5-6 years old). The use of this project in preparatory classes is not only an international practice but a requirement of the national curriculum to include these classes in all the official documents. What is more, a considerable number of schools in Albania have preparatory classes/kindergartens in their premises;
3. Designing and approving national standards⁶ for “Shkollat për Shëndetin” network in Albania;
4. Integrating into all subject syllabuses the concepts and other components that are related to healthy eating, physical activities, safety, hygiene, environment, Covid-19;
5. Drafting and compiling a set of materials and teaching toolkits for students, teachers and parents based on each educational level (preschool⁷, primary, lower secondary) which will include: (a) workbooks, (b) age-appropriate learning situations and scenarios, (c) samples of project works for each stage and level, (d) examples of extra curriculum activities which promote healthy habits and behaviours;
6. Raising the awareness of parents and community through children initiative on organizing health promoting activities;
7. Creating a profile of a successful health promoting teacher;
8. Setting up the professional network of health promoting teachers.

5.2.5. Long-term recommendations

1. Establishing a different "mind-set", as well as a different working culture in education based on the interests, wellbeing and health of children;
2. Integrating the issues of physical, mental, and social health of students in all aspects of school life, in school curricula, and in the everyday process of teaching and learning;

in the first phase, regardless of the subject they teach, will be selected and trained to serve as ToT and health promoting material developers for the future in support of students and other teachers.

⁵ Recommendation for drafting and designing an effective health promoting curriculum are found on page 88 in the review.

⁶ Table 15. standards for “Shkollat për Shëndetin” network can be found on page 88 in the review.

⁷ Preschool education (5-6 years old) is expected to be part of the compulsory education in Albania.

3. Encouraging students to lead the way in promoting healthy habits and behaviours in school and outside it, hence investing their time and energy in developing democratic approaches in school management.
4. Organizing training workshops, informative and practical sessions with children in primary and secondary education helping them develop their communicative and project writing skills, as well as support them organize awareness campaigns in schools and community;
5. Implementing initiatives just like “The school I like”, “This is my school”, “I say “YES!”, “Together we can”, “I like going to school”, “There is nothing like feeling better!”, “As healthy as I am!” “You speak, we listen”, etc.;
6. Organizing pre service trainings for student teachers. This recommendation refers to institutions of higher/tertiary education where Health Education should be provided as a separate subject or module, either in the first or second cycle of Master`s Studies. A common syllabus for Health Education should be designed for all the universities that prepare teachers.