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# Children, Education and Health

International Perspectives on Law and Policy

Edited by

Neville Harris
Paul Meredith

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Edited by NEVILLE HARRIS School of Law, University of Manchester

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## Foreword

The crucial link between health and education and their importance for the well-being of children and of wider society are increasingly acknowledged. The education of children—mainly though not exclusively through schools—is one of the foremost means of both promoting and safeguarding the health of children and of society: schools, indeed, carry a major responsibility for the inculcation in children of not just the biological and other scientific information relating to health and well-being, but a genuine and sensitive appreciation and understanding of the social, moral and ethical issues which inevitably arise in this context.

The challenges faced by different countries across the world in the context of health vary considerably and are dependent upon a complex range of economic, social and political considerations as well as environmental, climatic and other natural factors. The scale and complexity of the AIDS epidemic, for example, will for generations have a profound impact on the economic and social fabric of society in poorer parts of Africa and Asia, where the problems posed by the disease are on an almost unimaginable scale. Ignorance is a major factor here and although the problems in such continents contrast sharply with the types of challenge faced by many wealthier regions—including obesity, alcohol and other forms of drug abuse, and many physical and psychological conditions associated with stress—here too ignorance plays its part in many of the threats to health.

There can be little doubt that these and many other challenges posed by health are of crucial importance to the economic and social well being of all countries across the world and are central to governmental policy making. But they also raise fundamental issues of individual human rights: individuals have a fundamental right to effective health care and a right to be educated in such a way as to understand the health consequences of different lifestyle choices they may face. Here the link between education and health is very clear: many lifestyle choices exercised every day by individuals carry recognised health related risks, and it is of the first importance that individuals should fully understand the nature and scope of such risks and be placed in a position where they can make informed and mature choices in relation to them. Effective education underpins so many aspects of good health, and good health as one of the most important empowering elements in the enjoyment of a fulfilled life is truly a fundamental human right, but one which is denied to so many across the world.

Health presents challenges not only at governmental level, although clearly governmental policy-making is of profound importance. International organisations such as the World Health Organisation have a vital role to play in the field of health promotion, and international Charters and Conventions such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child have played and will continue to

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play a significant role in conditioning governmental thinking and exerting pressure on governments in the development of policy and—very importantly—in the allocation of resources in this context. One should, however, also fully recognise the vital importance of those working at lower levels within government, within the education system and within the health services: indeed, the promotion of good health should be seen as going right down to the individual citizen—the teacher, the health professional and, very importantly, the individual parent and the individual child.

This book clearly recognises that the challenge posed by health raises fundamental issues as to the substantive content of the curriculum in schools, as well as in relation to the pastoral care and counselling of pupils and, in some cases, parents and teachers. Few would challenge the proposition that personal, social and health education forms an immensely important element within a broad and balanced school curriculum, although many would argue that insufficient weight and priority are attached to it in many schools. But the substantive content of the school curriculum in this context raises many intractable and highly contentious ethical and moral dilemmas which must be recognised, but for which it may well be impossible to offer any satisfactory solution.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the context of the sex education curriculum and-no less important-the pastoral care and counselling of pupils in respect of their sexuality. It is by no means universally accepted, however, that schools have a legitimate role in the provision of sex education at all: many parents would take the view in all sincerity that the provision of sex education and counselling over issues of sexuality should be carried out exclusively within the family, that parents have a deep moral right and duty to bring their children up within the framework of their own culture, conscience and religious convictions, and that the public education system has no legitimate role to play in this context-or only a very limited role in terms of inculcating a sound knowledge and understanding of essential biological facts. Many, on the other hand, would take the view that schools should play a most important role in broadening children's perspective, in exposing their minds to the enriching experience of diverse approaches and giving them the widest possible range of educational experience consistent with a balanced, objective and critical presentation of issues. There is little common ground between these fundamentally different approaches, and it is almost certainly the case that no consensus will ever be attained in this context. But educational policy makers and teachers must recognise and respect this diversity of views and act with genuine sensitivity in this important and delicate area. What is clear is that sex education provides a fascinating study of policy-making in an extremely difficult context, as several of the chapters in this volume demonstrate.

Many other crucial issues relating to health and education are tackled in this volume: the editors have been fortunate to be able to include contributions by leading authors from a wide range of different educational systems across the international community, focusing on many key issues of concern. A major

strength of the book is that the authors have adopted widely divergent approaches, and have not hesitated to express controversial views in approaching the issues. This is a highly thought-provoking volume and a most welcome contribution to the debate.

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## Preface

States, through their institutions and policies, exercise a fundamental responsibility for safeguarding and promoting the health of their populations. Child health is a particular concern, and while infant mortality rates have fallen continually throughout the past century across the developed world, they remain high in less developed areas. Wars, famine and the continual presence of diseases such as malaria (despite some scientific advances of late) in transitional states put the less severe health risks in the developed world into perspective. New threats are, however, constantly emerging; since the 1980s there has been HIV/AIDS, which, as Christa Van Wyk explains chapter 9 in this collection, affects directly or indirectly the millions of children in South Africa who live as members of families containing one or more infected individuals, including, in many cases, the child him or herself.

The growing international recognition of the importance of better health promotion is reflected in the range of legislative obligations placed upon and/or accepted by states. As Laura Lundy explains in the book's opening chapter, this responsibility is underscored by the international human rights framework and especially, in the case of children, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Both internationally and within states sexual health is an area of particular concern. Teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) among young people continue to beset many countries. As Gracienne Lauwers explains in chapter 7, the Russian Federation has a huge problem with sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy among young people and, as elsewhere, is looking to the education system for some solutions. Indeed, it is a common theme of this book that in many states the role that schools and other educational institutions are expected to play in safeguarding health is growing. As Ann Blair explains in chapter 6, in an evaluation of the principles that underlie the state's growing attempts to regulate for better sexual health, 'education seems to be, at least for the moment, the best vaccine we have'.

The question is then: how should law and policy be framed? In the area of sex education in particular, issues of private morality, personal freedom and public welfare can come into conflict. In their respective chapters, Charles Glenn, in relation to the United States (chapter 4), and Paul Meredith, covering developments in England (chapter 5), highlight the problems that are faced by legislators in seeking to provide an appropriate legal framework in a pluralistic society where the health needs of often sexually active young people tend to play against the particular moral values held by parents and espoused by political ideologues. In England, which has a well-developed statutory framework, this conflict is partly resolved through the rather unsatisfactory means of conferring a

right upon individual parents to withdraw their children from sex education at school.

Prevention, as already noted in relation to sexual health above, is another common theme in the book. It is linked to the notions of protection and risk. Education may have a crucial role in preventing ill-health, through sex education or, for example, the promotion of better diets and exercise, as Gerald Fain explains in chapter 11, evaluating health promotion in American schools. But the school environment itself can pose health risks, mirroring the risks in wider society. One area of particular concern is the threat to the mental and physical health of children caused by bullying by fellow pupils; in chapter 2, Neville Harris discusses the incidence of bullying in schools in the UK, highlights the evidence on its effects and assesses the various and wide-ranging legal responses to it. Another risk concerns society's so-called 'drugs culture,' from which schools and school pupils are by no means immune. This is a particularly difficult nut to crack; as Charlotte Walsh explains in chapter 3, drugs education seems to have had 'minimal primary preventive effects' and the UK government is struggling to find the right legal response to a pervasive problem.

Health also becomes important in the context of access to education. Illness or incapacity threaten to limit opportunities to receive schooling. The law in many states will generally aim to ensure a child's inclusion in the education system regardless of, for example, his or her state of health or disability. In England and Australia, for example, the authorities are not only placed under non-discrimination duties but are also under positive (albeit conditional) obligations, as Marcia Conroy and Jim Jackson explain in chapter 10. If the child's ill-health poses a very serious risk to other children, such as where there is a highly contagious disease such as measles or SARS, isolation may be necessary. Similarly, degrees of disability and the need for a highly specialised learning environment will vary between disabled children, so that it is not possible to include all in mainstream education. Inclusion is nonetheless a very important principle and yet, as Marcia Conroy and Jim Jackson's chapter illustrates, there remain significant barriers to, and differences internationally in the progress towards, equality of access to education for children with a disability, including those with behavioural problems.

Inclusion is also threatened by social and professional attitudes towards HIV-infected pupils. In chapter 8, Charles Russo highlights the over-emphasis on the perceived legal and health risks arising from the presence of infected pupils within schools in the United States. Christa Van Wyk shows in chapter 9 that the presence of HIV infection and AIDS, and the attendant infection risks, are facts of life in South Africa's schools. However, as she explains, despite the fact that '[c]hildren with HIV have the right to attend any public school and their needs should, as far as is reasonably practicable, be accommodated in the school,' a nursery school has refused to admit an HIV-infected child, lest she bite another pupil, and as yet unresolved litigation has ensued.

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Given the breadth of the subject, it has been impossible to cover all aspects of children's education and health. We nevertheless hope that the book will raise awareness of some of the more problematic issues in the relationship between these two important spheres of responsibility. We are also hopeful that the book highlights the importance that needs to be paid to health in the context of education in order to safeguard and promote the rights of children, developmental as well as protective.

All bar one of the papers contained in this collection were originally presented at the annual conference of the European Association for Education Law and Policy (ELA) at the University of Manchester in November 2003, which explored the theme of Education, Health and the Law. All were updated for this collection and we are grateful to all the contributors, including Charlotte Walsh, whose paper was specially commissioned by the editors for this collection, for their hard work in preparing them. Given the controversial nature of some of the issues covered by the book we should add the caveat that the views expressed by individual authors do not necessarily coincide with those of the editors.

We also extend our gratitude to Professor Jan De Groof, President of ELA, and his assistant Gracienne Lauwers, for their support in the development of the conference and in giving us encouragement to bring this book to fruition.

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