Assessment of a national network: the case of the French teacher training colleges’ health education network

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Abstract

The French teacher training colleges’ health education (HE) network was set up in 2005 to encourage the inclusion of HE in courses for primary and secondary school teachers. A systematic process of monitoring the activity and the impact of this initiative was implemented. This analysis was systematically compared with the perceptions of teaching staff involved in the network. This paper assesses the network after 2 years using documents produced and interviews with 24 coordinators. Twenty-nine teacher training colleges out of a total of 31 are involved in the network. The network has helped to create links between teacher training colleges, extend HE training and encourage partnerships with other public health organizations. By 2007, HE was included in courses offered by 19 teacher training colleges as opposed to only 3 in 2005. This study not only showed the positive impact of the network but also revealed issues in its management and presented new challenges to ensure the effectiveness of the network. The network has succeeded in attracting and training trainers who were already providing or were interested in HE. Reaching other trainers who are not familiar with HE remains a challenge for the future.

Introduction

Schools are recognized as one of the key settings for health education (HE) [1, 2]. The development of school HE policies at national and regional level is supported by international recommendations from World Health Organization (WHO) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) [3–6]. Considerable international research has been carried out into this field as well as on the impact of HE programmes and health promotion strategies at the school level [7–13]. According to the model of Downie et al. [14], HE is considered as part of health promotion. In Europe, the approach to HE in different countries depends on the history, objectives and structures of that country’s school system [15]. In France, HE is not taught as a separate subject but is a part of the everyday activity of all primary and secondary school teachers. Nevertheless, even though schools are not primarily concerned with aspects of children’s health, the capacity of each pupil to learn effectively is affected by his/her state of health [19]. Teachers, then, have a role to play in supporting the health and well-being of students and so their commitment is one of the most important factors for developing HE in schools [20,21].

Teacher training courses are considered to play a key role in developing effective HE projects [22–31]. How HE is incorporated into initial and in-service teacher training courses is, therefore, important. In France, teachers qualify after a 3-year degree at a university, followed by a further 2 years at a teacher training college called Institut
Universitaire de Formation des Maı́tres, which is part of the university.

Taking into account the emphasis in the international literature on teacher training and the fact of the lack of coordination at national level (in France, there is no structure devoted to health promotion and HE in school), a group of teaching staff and education researchers set up a national network focused on initial and in-service teacher training. In 2005, the national committee of heads of teacher training college officially created 'the French teacher training colleges’ health education network'. This network aims to support and develop the HE training provided for student teachers. The network approached the issue at two levels: (i) the professional training of teaching staff in the planning and implementation of programmes of study, both in initial and in-service teacher training and (ii) the linking of teaching staff with local public health organizations. The network had five main aims: (Aim 1) to establish links between colleges, (Aim 2) to bring institutions involved in HE into the project, (Aim 3) to provide HE training for teaching staff, (Aim 4) to develop HE training toolkits and (Aim 5) to promote the work carried out by teacher training colleges and the various working groups within the network. A steering committee was established to bring together the various state agencies and departments responsible for HE in schools in France and to direct the activities of the network. Close links have been set up with the two main state agencies working in the fields of HE: the Interdepartmental Taskforce for the Fight Against Drugs and Drug Addiction (Mission Interministérielle de Lutte contre la Drogue et la Toxicomanie) and the national institute for health education and prevention (Institut Nationale de Prévention et d’Éducation pour la Santé). A management board is responsible for implementing the activities of the network. The network has coordinators who are appointed by the head of the training colleges. They are the network’s referent in each college and they coordinate the network’s activity at a local level.

Networks are one of the preferred forms of arranging cooperation between diverse fields, especially for health promotion [32]. The concept of networks was developed in the 1980s and 1990s in particular by the WHO which advocated the settings approach [33]. Networks can be defined as a structural organization based on human relationships and not transaction. They are built on trust, not trade and on long-term rather than short-term goals. Such networks place the importance of people and communication at the centre of their focus.

This type of structure is complex and therefore difficult to assess. Broesskamp-Stone [32] proposed a framework for assessing health promotion networks based on a combination of a sociological approach to networks and health promotion practices. The framework defines four groups of factors found in both fields: environment, purpose, processes and structures. We did not use such a complex approach in this first study. We used a framework developed by Pineault and Daveluy [34] based on the analysis of structures, processes and outcomes. It was decided to systematically compare this analysis of the network’s activity with the perceptions of those teaching staff who were involved in the network. This study aimed to assess both the function and the impact of the network. Thus, it facilitated us in (i) assessing the current situation, (ii) defining qualitative and quantitative indicators to identify the impact of the network, (iii) setting out methods for monitoring the network’s activity and (iv) providing information to the various associated organizations on the network’s capability. This work proposes a framework for understanding networks in order to improve their functioning by describing a method of assessing a national network.

**Methodology**

**Context of the study**

Each year, 84 000 students attend the 31 teacher training colleges and are taught by 4500 full-time teaching staff. Twenty-six of them are located in France and five are in French overseas departments and territories [35].
Data collection

Two main sources of data were used. First, qualitative and quantitative data were extracted from documents produced by the network (agreements, minutes of steering committee, management board and coordinators’ meetings, newsletters and e-mails). These documents were generated between June 2005 and June 2007 and collected for the purpose of continuous assessment from the time the network was set up. All documents were analysed with the help of a reference method of content analysis [36]. This content analysis was used based on a framework which consisted of the five network’s aims.

Then, qualitative data were gathered by interviewing coordinators between May and July 2007. An interview schedule was developed. It consisted of detailed open-ended questions. More especially, the coordinators were asked what they had gained from the network, how HE was taken into account in their training college and whether they had noticed any changes over the past 2 years. These interviews were taped and transcribed. The data collection was terminated upon data saturation.

Data analysis

The analysis is structured into two parts. The first part is divided into an analysis of structures, processes and outcomes. The second part is focused on the analysis of the interviews with the coordinators.

Analysis of structures, processes and outcomes

Structures. The analysis of structures examined the relevance of the structures implemented and the links to other organizations developed to achieve the initial goals of the network.

Processes. Processes were analysed in two stages.

The processes related to the management activity of the network (steering committee and management board) were studied first. The aim of the activity of the coordination team is to encourage the creation of links. To achieve this goal, the team can use three approaches: phone, meetings and mail (regular and electronic). Indicators of activity were chosen from meetings and electronic mail [37]. In addition, to have a view on what was the focus of the activity, an analysis was undertaken of the themes discussed during meetings, following on from which three indicators were chosen: (i) the level of activity of the coordination team studied through the frequency of meetings and the number of e-mails exchanged during a month taking into account the number of working days in this month, (ii) the number of attendants and institutions represented at the meetings, (iii) the themes discussed during meetings, which were extracted from meetings’ minutes using a framework based on the five aims of the network together with assessment, financial and communication aspects.

The second part of the analysis was focused on those processes related to the network’s activities: conference, coordinators’ meetings, training sessions for teaching staff, toolkit development and communication. Two indicators were chosen: (i) the number of attendants per college for each of the activities and (ii) the level of activity of the coordination team (see below).

Outcomes. Two indicators were used in the outcomes’ analysis: (i) the way the work was organized around HE questions in colleges and (ii) the integration of HE in the new training courses for primary and secondary school teachers.

Analysis of interviews with the coordinators

The qualitative study of the impact of the network was based on interviews with 24 coordinators. The interviews were studied using speech content analysis [36]. Based on the pre-determined tree of themes from interview schedule, the data were then coded into major themes with new emerging themes and patterns continuously added during coding. Coordinators’ comments revealed areas in which the network had made a positive contribution, what difficulties the coordinators had had to face and their expectations. Analytic points are illustrated by direct quotation.
Results

Analysis of the documents generated by the network’s activity

This part of the assessment was divided into three parts: (i) structures, (ii) processes and (iii) outcomes.

Structures

For each of the five objectives of the network, Fig. 1 shows the structures and activities set up and, if appropriate, the partnerships developed to achieve them.

The network was represented in 30 teacher training colleges by a coordinator appointed by the head of the college. This group of coordinators worked together and generated links between colleges (Aim 1). Department of education, department of health, state agencies and the committee of heads of teacher training college were deeply committed in the steering committee (Aim 2), they supported (from a political and financial point of view) the development of a training curriculum for the teaching staff of colleges (Aim 3), the design of a training toolkit (Aim 4) and the organization of a national conference in 2006 (Aim 5).

Processes

Management activities. The steering committee met six times between June 2005 and June 2007 and the management board 26 times. All the eight institutions invited to the steering committee attended regularly and were represented by one or more people. All the themes mentioned in the methods and presented in Table I, except for the financial aspects, were discussed at least twice. Over this
Table 1. Steering committee (SC) and management board (MB) meetings: attendance and themes discussed over time

| Time Scale  | June 05 | July 05 | Aug 05 | Sept 05 | Oct 05 | Nov 05 | Dec 05 | Jan 06 | Feb 06 | March 06 | April 06 | May 06 | June 06 | July 06 | Aug 06 | Sept 06 | Oct 06 | Nov 06 | Dec 06 | Jan 07 | Feb 07 | March 07 | April 07 | May 07 | June 07 |
|-------------|---------|---------|-------|---------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|----------|---------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
|             | 4       | 4       | 3     | 11      | 8       | 9      | 10     | 13     | 12     | 16       | 12      | 11     | 10     | *      | *      | 12     | 9      | 13     | 12     | 9      | 15      | 10     | 15     | 11     | 11     |
| Themes      |         |         |       |         |         |        |        |        |        |          |         |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |
| Coordinators| X       | X       | X     | X       | X       | X      | X      | X      | X      | X        | X       | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      |
| Institutional| X       | X       | X     | X       | X       | X      | X      | X      | X      | X        | X       | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      |
| Training    | X       | X       | X     | X       | X       | X      | X      | X      | X      | X        | X       | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      |
| Toolkit     | X       | X       | X     | X       | X       | X      | X      | X      | X      | X        | X       | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      |
| Conference  | X       | X       | X     | X       | X       | X      | X      | X      | X      | X        | X       | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      |
| Financial   | X       |         | X     | X       | X       | X      | X      | X      | X      | X        | X       | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      |
| Assessment  | X       |         | X     |         | X       | X      | X      | X      | X      | X        | X       | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      |
| Communication| X       | X       | X     | X       | X       | X      | X      | X      | X      | X        | X       | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      | X      |

For each meeting, a cross symbolizes the themes discussed in reference to the five objectives of the network together with assessment, financial and communication aspects (rows Themes). The last row shows over time the other events related to the network’s activities [meetings to develop a training toolkit (Toolkit), conferences (Conference), coordinators’ meetings (Coordinators) and training sessions for teaching staff (Training)]. *Corresponds to missing data.
period, the number of people attending management board meetings increased from 4 to 11, from 10 different teacher training colleges. All themes mentioned were discussed on a regular basis at these meetings (Table I).

The frequency of the e-mail correspondence for these two structures reveals a difference in activity (Fig. 2). That cannot be solely explained by the difference in the number of participants on the management board and on the steering committee. For the steering committee, there was relatively little correspondence, and this was mainly for preparing meetings. For the management board, there was a peak during the first months after the network was set up, reflecting the implementation stage of the board. Another peak was observed in June 2007, corresponding to discussion about institutional changes.

Activities organized for teaching staff. Representatives of 29 colleges attended at least one of the meetings organized by the network (Table II). The high number of teaching staff from Auvergne reflects the leading role played by this teacher training college; the academic research team focused on HE in schools is located in this college.

In May 2006, the first national conference was organized and was attended by 150 delegates. Twenty-four colleges were represented. Teachers, physicians, nurses, education authority and Non Governmental Organizations (NGO) staff were also attended. The conference generated an increase in the activity of the coordination team just before the event in relation to the organization stage and less afterwards as proceedings were written.

The network’s communication was focused on newsletters’ publication: 12 000 copies of each of the four newsletters published between September 2005 and June 2007 were sent to teacher training colleges. The activity generated at the coordination team level peaked when the network was set up, corresponding to the creation of the newsletter. There was a smaller peak whenever a newsletter was prepared and published. Through these newsletters, all the aims of the network were at least discussed twice.

One hundred and thirty people participated in the development of a HE toolkit to support teaching staff. The toolkit working groups engaged in regular activity, with peaks when meetings were organized and a gap during the summer.

Nine training sessions were organized between September 2006 and June 2007 attended by 200 people. For technical reasons, information on e-mails exchanged was only available from January 2007. There were two peaks in the work generated at the coordination team level between January and June 2007: the first corresponded to the training session organized for teaching staff from January to March (three sessions) and the second reflected the preparation of the meetings scheduled for May (two sessions) (Fig. 2).

Outcomes

Working groups set up in colleges. During the 2005 assessment, before the network was set up, there were working groups in five teacher training colleges (Fig. 3). These groups seemed to stimulate interest in HE in their establishments and set up links with other organizations. They created their own network at local level. In 2007, 14 institutes had HE working groups (Fig. 3).

Incorporation of HE in courses for primary and secondary school teachers. In 2005, three colleges had HE in courses for primary and secondary school teachers (Fig. 3). In 2007, 19 colleges included HE in their new courses (Fig. 3). Some of these courses are for in-service training and some are initial courses for primary or secondary school teachers. Some sessions are compulsory and others are optional.

Analysis of interviews with the coordinators

Of the coordinators interviewed, we were able to give five main ways in which the network had helped: (i) creating links at a national level between colleges, (ii) sharing knowledge and resources through training, (iii) promoting links with other local public health organizations, (iv) getting acknowledgement from the establishment and
The first point raised is that the network brought people from teacher training colleges with an interest in HE together at national level. It gave them the opportunity to share experiences: ‘meeting other people gave me new ideas and enabled me to know what other people were doing’ [Teaching staff Interview (TI) 7].

The second point is that the network brings knowledge and resources through training to coordinators and teaching staff: ‘it gives me additional skills, both personally and professionally’ (TI 18).

The third aspect is that links with other public health organizations are considered to be important and some have been developed. The network is seen as a national structure which gives weight to the coordinators’ HE actions: the network ‘makes it possible to rely on a structure which coordinates the various colleges and thus increases their influence’ (TI 17).

The fourth point mentioned is acknowledgement and thanks from the head of the colleges to those responsible for HE matters. According to some coordinators, the last of the five significant ways in which the network helped was the noticeable change observed in attitude towards HE in teacher training colleges: ‘We have moved away from the idea of preventive medicine towards a more general concept of HE, such as the well-being of pupils in the school environment’ (TI 13).

These interviews also revealed difficulties faced by the coordinators in their everyday work. The first issue mentioned was the difficulty in encouraging their colleagues to take an active interest in HE: ‘it is not the priority of teaching staff’ (TI 9). Teaching staff still consider HE as an additional activity over and above their normal work: ‘they see it as additional work and do not want to get involved’ (TI 7).

The second issue was the lack of effective support from the heads of the college and the difficulty of finding time for HE in curricula: ‘It is not easy, there are considerable constraints and the timetables have not been extended’ (TI 6).

The last category of information extracted from interviews with coordinators was their expectations from the network support. They asked for practical training and tools to help them to convince their colleagues of the importance of including HE in teacher training. Coordinators also wished to develop communication tools to improve correspondence between meetings. They suggested an online forum to enable them to share documents and experience.

**Discussion**

This study assessed how the French teacher training colleges’ HE network functions and what impact it has had. It assessed the situation in 2007 and set up qualitative and quantitative indicators to identify the factors influencing the integration of HE in teacher training courses in order to monitor its activities and provide information to the various associated organizations on the network’s capability. This work tried to propose a framework which may help the network’s understanding by describing a way of assessing a national network in order to improve its functioning.

Structures were set up for each initial objective of the network and links were established. State agencies, department of education and department of health were associated with the network’s projects.

The processes analysis showed that these structures were active as the steering committee and the management board met regularly. Moreover, the network’s activities attracted people from most of the training colleges (29 of 31) and have stimulated the coordination team as it can be seen by the frequency of e-mail correspondence. However, a lower involvement of overseas colleges in the network can be noted. This may be due to the context (small size of these colleges, low number of staff …) and to the cost of staff’s participation to the meetings due to the distance. Nevertheless, whenever a training session is organized in these sites, it seems to create and encourage a local team building, for example in the case of La Réunion.

In 2005, three teacher training colleges had HE in courses for primary and secondary school teachers whereas in 2007, 19 included HE in their new curriculum. As each college wrote its own curriculum according to a national framework, the mode of
Fig. 2. E-mail exchanges between October 2005 and June 2007 related to the network’s management board, steering committee, conference, communication, the toolkit’s development and the activity of training sessions for teaching staff. Through this period, the management board was composed of 11 teacher trainers and the steering committee was attended by members of eight institutions. The e-mails exchanged related to the conference involved the coordination team, the members of the management board (11) and the contributors (26). The publication of the four newsletters involved the members of the management board as well as six authors per letter. Within the toolkit development, e-mails exchanged involved the 130 participants. And finally, the training sessions generated e-mails exchanged between 15 people in charge of their organization. M stands for meeting, NL for newsletter and S for group of sessions.
integration of HE varied from one college to another. As well as its contribution to this development, the coordinators consider that the network also contributed to the creation of links between colleges themselves and with other public health organizations, as well as the provision of HE training.

This study achieved its initial objectives and provided useful information on how the network worked. It showed why the network appeared to have been successfully implemented and its contribution to HE, more attention having been given to HE in teacher training colleges. The study also revealed some issues that should be taken into account in the management of the network.

The network created links between the various colleges on HE matters by bringing together people

Table II. Number of representatives per teacher training college attending to conferences, coordinators’ meetings and regional training sessions for teaching staff and number of people per teacher training college who were involved in the development of a training toolkit

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who were working in or interested in HE. One of the keys to this success was that the network is clearly set in the teacher training college’s culture, with documents and training produced by teaching staff for teaching staff [28]. The network based its actions on the directives of the department of education and research which showed the importance of HE in schools and HE training for teachers. It also encouraged collaboration with other organizations working in the HE fields such as education and health authorities, state agencies and NGOs. At the regional level, the network led to a strengthening of the relationships between teacher training colleges and public health authorities. These links are a means of recognizing the role of colleges and teachers in HE and are essential to ensure sustainability [1].

Factors other than the impact of the network may have contributed towards the changes observed in the attitude towards HE in colleges. During the period studied, there were also changes in directives from the department of education. Some documents were written in the aim of developing a favourable attitude towards HE [17, 18, 38]. However, this study indicated that the network appeared to have had an impact on the people working with the network or involved in its activities as well as on training curricula. This could be because the network takes simultaneous account of (i) institutional aspects by working with state departments, state agencies and the national committee of heads of teacher training college; (ii) personal aspects by providing training and enabling people to share experiences and (iii) and finally contextual aspects by undertaking and promoting collaborative work with all those involved in HE [39].

Concerning the network management, three points should be highlighted. This network is characterized by strong support from teaching staff also involved in academic research. The proposals are mainly made by the management board which has an overall view of the network activities. Financial and political aspects are only discussed by a small group of people. This could be seen as a management failure. To be closer to health promotion principles (equity, participation, advocacy and empowerment [1–6]), the processes of decision making have been modified, moving towards a more collective one which should help to ensure that the network remains effective.

**Fig. 3.** HE in primary and secondary school teacher training curricula and HE working groups in the various teacher training colleges (TTC) in 2005 and 2007. Primary and secondary school teacher training curricula including HE are represented by a grey circle and working groups by a white circle.
Despite official encouragement and the trend towards developing HE, coordinators still found considerable difficulty in stimulating their colleagues and enlisting active support from their heads. The network has succeeded in bringing together teaching staff who were already working or interested in HE, involving a few people in each college. The challenge is now to attract people who are not familiar with HE questions. The network strategy should be reviewed to attain this new objective. To help coordinators in stimulating their colleagues and enlisting active support from their heads, coordinators’ meetings have been redirected towards (i) sharing of experiences (it can be noted here that the teacher training college of Saint Etienne in the south east of France became the first official ‘health promoting college’ in September 2007) and (ii) tools and strategies they can use.

This study provided an initial assessment of the network’s impact and a general view of how it functions. It revealed some points which should be improved. The assessment method itself can also be improved. This initial assessment was limited to interviews with coordinators and to the study of documents and e-mails. The points of view of other people involved in the network should be taken into account as well as of people working in partnership who are not teacher training college staff. It would also be interesting to identify the various mechanisms which influence how HE is viewed in colleges and how the network is associated with any changes. The adoption of an approach similar to that proposed by Broesskamp-Stone [32], briefly outlined in the Introduction, would certainly help to provide a better understanding of the complexity of the French teacher training colleges’ HE network insofar as it offers the tools needed for an assessment of the nature of the relationship, enabling a more robust understanding of the outcomes of the network.

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Conflict of interest statement

None declared.

References


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