Nutrition education and citizenship

Individual responsibility and democratic politics

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BACKGROUND – overweight and obesity is a global and social health problem

- Worldwide obesity has nearly tripled since 1975.
- The proportion of obesity in Sweden has tripled since the 1980s, which means that over one million adults today have obesity.
- Obesity causes heart diseases and diabetes
- Obesity is preventable.

http://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/obesity-and-overweight
DETERMINANTS OF OBESITY

- changes in how we live
- stress
- cannot be explained by genetic factors
- social factors such as inequality

DETERMINANTS OF OBESITY: INEQUALITY


SOLUTIONS TO OBESITY

- inequalities must be kept at the forefront of interventions (Marmot, M and Bell, R 2010)

- the most important determinants of health are social and economic circumstances. (Wilkinson, R. and Pickett, K. 2009: 277)

- governmental support (Lancet 2015)

- health issues are political issues (Marmot 2011:3)
HOWEVER...
...there is a paradox...
HEALTHISM situates the problem of health and disease at the level of the individual. (Crawford, R. 1980)

Obesity, treatment and prevention
- focus on the individual;
- education about risk;
- coaching for better habits.
This overlook the reasons why people continue to live unhealthy (Wilkinson, R. and Pickett, K. 2009: 101-102)
What about health-education in school?

Our study address nutrition, overweight and obesity-associated illnesses in textbooks for secondary school in relation to individualisation and political responsibility.

How is nutrition, overweight and obesity-associated illnesses portrayed?
Political / non-political
Societal / individual
Focus: Nutrition, overweight and obesity-associated illnesses in textbooks for secondary school.

Point of departure: An important function for education is to socialise young citizens to participation in a democratic society.

Hypothesis: The paradox of responsibility. The individual is made responsible for problems that require political solutions.
Method

Swedish textbooks for upper-secondary school
Textbooks in school subjects that according to the Swedish national curricula has a focus on health.
Subjects included in the study: Biology, Science, Physical education and health
The textbooks are commonly used in schools
Main theoretical perspective used in the analyse: politicization and de-politicization (individualization)
**individual**

**determinants / causes**

- Fast food, Candy, Western lifestyle, Healthy food is more expansive than junk food,
- Changed availability,
- Industrialisation, Marketing, The way we travel, Sedentary work,
- Excess of food

**solutions**

- Nutrition / diet education, Introduction of free school lunches, Obesity as a political issue on EU level, Restrictions of transfat,
- Governmental recommendations about fat, vitamins etc.

**Black text = descriptions**

- To much, to often and wrong,
- Biological, How we live, To much fat, Genetical, Medical,
- Consumption, Pasta, sugar, white bread, potatoes, Lifestyle, Fizzy drinks, Wrong food, HDL/LDL (high and low lipoproteins), Lack of exercise too much food.

**Green text = recommendations**

- Walk or bike to school, Eat at the same time every day,
- Do not skip breakfast, Eat balanced food with fresh vegetables, Eat regularly, Eat 1 – 5 times a day,
- Eat vegetables and fruit, Eat less candy, Drink less soft-drinks, Avoid salt, Measure your BMI, Measure your waist, Be active, Eat fish three times a week, Eat less sugar, Half the consumption of candy and cakes,
- Eat half kilo fruit or vegetables a day,
- Eat full grain bread, Become more knowledgeable, Follow the healthy platter.
- Food with low GI, Measure BMR (basal metabolism)and PAL (physical action level), Good food habits, Changed diet habits, Decreased intake of milk, butter, cheese, red meat, Less HDL, More LDL, More fiber, Diet, Surgery, Intake of good fat, The right food and the right exercise.
Conclusion

The analysis confirm previous research on healthism and stress (eg. Malmberg & Urbas 2018, Urbas & Malmberg 2018)

Obesity is

- de-politicized to a large extent.
- solutions are predominantly formulated on the individual level.
We argue for a need to keep health education focused on citizenship. Health education should focus on individual responsibility, but must also deal with …

• questions of political engagement and democratic decision making.

• actions which focus on the translation of individual responsibility into collective and political concerns (Biesta 2011).
Thank you!

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According to Hay politics share four different but related features

• in situations of choice: “...politics does not, and cannot, arise in situations in which human purpose can exert no influence”

• the capacity for agency: when human beings can make a difference.

• deliberation, when human beings talk about, scrutinize, debate, draw attention to and explore options related to an issue.

• politics is a social activity, which means that politics occurs in situations when activities and choices directly or indirectly have consequences for other human beings
Healthism is still an issue

Example: anxiety and stress.

- The problems of anxiety and stress are in contemporary societies framed as personal (not political) problems.
- Mindfulness is conceived as a panacea for problems of anxiety and stress.
- Root causes such as the work environment and adequate solutions such as political reforms are often excluded.
- Citizens don’t get the opportunity to influence decisions that affect their lives; they get a mindfulness session (Cederström and Spicer 2015:134).

Carl Cederström and André Spicer (2015)
Health in the Swedish national curricula

The course will cover following core content:

- Relationship between living conditions, health and disease. (BIOLOGY)

- The importance of physical activity and lifestyle for bodily ability and health. Importance of diet for health and achievement. (PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND HEALTH)

- Relationship between the individual's health, daily habits and lifestyle in society, for example in the field of diet. (SCIENCE)
Health education, citizenship and democratic politics

We argue, in line with Biesta (2011), for a need to keep health education focused on democratic politics.

Health education should not only focus on individual responsibility, but also deal with …

• *questions of political engagement and democratic decision making.*

• *actions which focus on the translation of individual responsibility into collective and political concerns.*
• The failure to highlight political factors such as legislation on schooling as debatable and changeable creates a world where factors outside of the individual are seen as natural and as out of reach by human intervention.

• The perspective given in the textbooks implicates that individual transformation and/or adaptation to the current society, not political action, is the only way to handle obesity.

• The only option given to the student is to find and use individual strategies to handle obesity, not to discuss, scrutinize and by collective action try to change the cultural, societal, economic and political surrounding.