

Better training needed to help new teachers promote healthy lifestyles to children

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Pupils learning about health.

Research by the University of Southampton suggests new teachers could be better trained to help them promote health and lifestyle issues to children in schools.

A survey of managers of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) courses has shown there is a lack of attention paid to public [health](#) priorities in teacher training and little consistency in helping trainees to develop the skills they need to promote positive health behaviours to pupils. Government [public health](#) priorities include issues such as, healthy

eating, physical exercise and preventing smoking, drug and alcohol abuse.

Dr Jonathan Shepherd, the study's lead researcher and Principal Research Fellow at the University's Southampton Health Technology Assessments Centre (SHTAC), says: "Until now, there has been no clear overview of how trainee teachers are prepared during ITE in England to promote health and wellbeing to children in schools. We hope this study – the first national, comprehensive survey into the issue – will help address this."

Researchers from SHTAC, Southampton Education School and Medicine at the University of Southampton sent online questionnaires to 220 ITE course managers in higher education institutions and employment and school-centred courses, of which 74 returned completed forms. They also conducted in-depth interviews with 19 course managers.

Based on the survey findings, the researchers found that for new teachers there is:

- a lack of attention and little consistency in provision of adequate training to equip them with the skills they need to promote public health priorities in the classroom
- a greater emphasis is given in their training to topics perceived as being more closely relevant to a pupil's learning, such as emotional health
- the majority of ITE providers recognised the importance of inclusion of health and well-being in the teacher training curriculum in England and held a holistic perspective on education
- little use of external expertise from health professionals, such as nurses

and doctors, to support trainee teachers in building their knowledge and confidence in health matters

The researchers also found that the main barrier to health promotion training was a lack of time in the ITE curriculum and a perception that health and well-being were lower priorities than other aspects of education in new government education policies.

Dr Jenny Byrne from the Southampton Education School, comments: "Our research has shown that training results in great improvements in trainee teachers' confidence and competence in dealing with certain aspects of [health education](#). All of our [teacher training](#) courses have elements of health education and this includes a 'Health Day' that is supported and facilitated by a multi-disciplinary team of [health professionals](#).

"The public health white paper Healthy Lives, Healthy People emphasises the role of teachers in promoting healthy lifestyles and preventing risky behaviours among young people. Coupled with responsibility for public health moving from the NHS to, in part, local authorities – communities and, in particular, schools will become even more important in addressing health needs and inequalities in their local areas."

The researchers emphasise that they would like to conduct further studies surveying mentors and tutors in placement schools, as well as trainee teachers themselves. In addition, they would like to conduct research into the feasibility and effectiveness of inter-agency and inter-disciplinary collaborations to support health education in ITE. They have also recently been awarded a research grant of £56,630 from the Leverhulme Trust to carry out further work within the field of ITE and health education. This is an 18 month research project to follow up trainee teachers from Southampton who receive training in health and

well-being as part of their PGCE [training](#) courses.

More information: Sue Dewhirst, Karen Pickett, Viv Speller, Jonathan Shepherd, Jenny Byrne, Palo Almond, Marcus Grace, Debbie Hartwell, and Paul Roderick. "Are trainee teachers being adequately prepared to promote the health and well-being of school children? A survey of current practice." *J Public Health* first published online October 29, 2013 [DOI: 10.1093/pubmed/fdt103](https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdt103)

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