

Health Education in Primary Schools: The Effects of an Educational Programme on the Representations of HIV/AIDS in Children

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ABSTRACT Health education is a part of the primary school science curriculum in France. Teachers often consider sexuality education and sexually transmitted diseases prevention as a topic they cannot teach without the help of partners. This paper is an account of a research carried out to study the representations of primary school pupils (Key Stage 2, French children, from 9-11) about HIV/AIDS and to analyse the impact of an educational programme on these representations. The programme was based on a socio-constructivist approach to learning. It aimed to modify pupils' representations through regular teacher's activities and interventions of health educators. The results indicate that after the intervention, pupils' scientific knowledge was more precise, and communication about HIV/AIDS between members of the family improved. The representations shifted from a sense of powerlessness and fatality towards a sense of the possibility of acting to forestall infection. Nevertheless, the impact of the intervention was weaker on under-privileged pupils.

KEY WORDS: Health education, HIV/AIDS, primary school science education.

Introduction

In France, health education is included in the primary school science curriculum. A part of this curriculum is called "human body and health education" (MEN, 2002). A quantitative study that focused on teachers' practices showed that health topics are mainly nutrition, hygiene, and dental health (Jourdan, Picc, Aublet-Cuvelier, Berger, Lejeune, Laquet-Riffaud, Geneix, & Glanddier, 2002). In the curriculum, the topic "Reproduction of living beings and sexuality education" concerns children aged 9-11 (Key Stage 2). Teachers often acknowledge that teaching about sexuality education and prevention of sexually transmitted diseases is difficult, because they do not feel comfortable with the subject matter. In a previous study (Jourdan et al., 2002), it had been shown that sexuality and AIDS were tackled by only 8 teachers out of 286 that were involved in the study. However, the curriculum guidelines of the French ministry of education (MEN, 2003) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) texts insist on the necessity for implementing

