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“On top of the world” – promoting health and equity in children and youth in the arctic region

Background/Objectives

Children and youth in the arctic region of Sweden face challenges like decreased self-assessed overall health and increased mental and somatic disorders. Due to climate changes, industrial expansion and an overall diminishing mindset there is a need for responsible development of the arctic region with health in mind. According to the World Health Organization health literacy is an important skill in order to live a good healthy life and the United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals offer a framework for integrating health promotion, sustainable development and equity. The aim was to describe and understand experiences and visionary ideas for promoting health and equity in children and youth in the arctic region from the perspectives of students, school staff and politicians.

Methods

The study was part of the research and development initiative “Arctic Children and Youth” in the 14 most northern municipalities in Sweden. A total of 63 participants wrote open letters, were interviewed or participated in a workshop; 29 students 13-19 years old (21 boys, 8 girls) and 34 adults (6 men, 28 women) teachers, school nurses, health coach, social worker, principal and politicians. Data was analyzed using qualitative content analysis.

Results

The participants experiences and visionary ideas stressed interpersonal interactions and relations beyond profession, age and experiences. The connection between health and learning was evident and they described a strength-based and appreciative environment suggesting that physical, mental, social and existential well-being interplay. They argued for prioritizing student participation and a sense of togetherness co-creating a healthy space where everybody are able to succeed by sharing, learning, and being able to develop and feel joy.

Discussion

This calls for holistic and sustainable health education to promote health literacy in which the students’ lives are the starting point, and an enabling school community acts as a common ground to share, learn and develop life-skills in order to make healthy choices throughout their life. These results can be used to build an empowering regional organization with students, school staff and politicians to challenge the arctic mindset promoting health literacy so children and youth are not only living in the arctic region but also feeling as they are “on top of the world”.

Keywords

arctic region, children, empowerment, equity, health promotion, health literacy, school