

Stakeholders Engagement on Effective Implementation of Focusing Resources on Effective School Health (FRESH) Initiative in Nigeria

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Abstract

Focusing Resources on Effective Stakeholders Engagement (FRESH) framework serves as a comprehensive guide to improving health outcomes among school-going children. In Nigeria, the successful execution of FRESH relies significantly on robust stakeholder engagement strategies. The School Health Programme is a comprehensive initiative addressing the well-being of both students and staff within educational settings. The emergence of the FRESH approach, born out of the World Education Forum in Dakar in April 2000, aimed to fulfill these components. However, Nigeria, as a developing nation, faces challenges in realizing these objectives. This article identified and addressed the existing gaps hindering the implementation of the FRESH approach in schools. By delving into the Background of School Health Programmes in Nigeria and the FRESH Approach, it sheds light on the vital components of the School Health Programme and the specific objectives outlined by FRESH. Furthermore, this article outlined strategies and approaches for effectively integrating the FRESH approach into the school system. Recommendations include stakeholder involvement, advocating for Ministries and Government agencies at all levels to define and enforce their roles in implementing the School Health Programme, organizing awareness programs for school administrators, teachers, and students, and establishing health committees within schools and communities dedicated to facilitating the effective execution of the School Health Programme.

Keywords: Effective, Focus, Health, Resources, School, Stakeholder

Introduction

The School Health Programme (SHP) gained prominence as a fundamental aspect for fostering effective education within school premises. To realize the objectives of the SHP, a strategy was devised at the World Educational Forum in Dakar, known as FRESH (Focusing Resources on Effective School Health), aimed at enhancing school health globally. FRESH advocates four main components for National School Health Programmes. Maier and Joerger (2005) highlight the growing international recognition of the FRESH framework among donors, agencies, and stakeholders as an impactful approach for school health. Issues like social, mental health, and lifestyle behaviours, including violence, substance abuse, and other factors hindering students' presence or learning, have gained universal acknowledgment.

The FRESH framework positions schools as community hubs serving students and families, advocating for comprehensive school-based initiatives that extend support to parents, engage community organizations, and integrate with broader regional or national strategies. Recognizing that school-level efforts or singular programs aren't sustainable without the active involvement of local/regional authorities and ministries, it emphasizes long-term, systems-based planning involving continuous improvement and capacity-building actions (Fresh Partners, 2019).

Despite the integration of FRESH initiative into the Physical and Health Education Curriculum, government-owned Basic Education and Secondary Schools in Nigeria haven't effectively implemented the FRESH approach since the year 2000 (Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council, 2003; World Bank, 2015). Moronkola (2012) outlines various challenges hindering the effective implementation of school health programs in Nigeria, including low health knowledge among teachers, misconceptions among students and teachers, negative attitudes toward SHP, inadequate resources, teacher incompetence, minimal support from non-governmental agencies, and lack of protective legislation for students' health risks in schools. The burden of staff workload due to low recruitment, insufficient health professionals during emergencies, and the absence of dedicated resources, like school coaches augmenting Physical Education teachers, pose significant risks to both staff and students, potentially leading to health-related issues, absenteeism, and even fatalities, impacting teaching and learning quality.

Given these challenges, this article explores Stakeholder Engagement as a crucial means to Focusing Resources on Effective School Health (FRESH), recognizing the pivotal role that collaborative stakeholder involvement can play in addressing these impediments and enhancing school health outcomes.

Concepts of School Health Programme

The School Health Programme (SHP) stands as a vital initiative aimed at addressing the immediate health needs of students while establishing a strong foundation for their future, with support from the home, community, and government (McMorrow et al., 2020). It encompasses a range of projects and activities within the school environment, designed to safeguard and enhance the health and overall development of the school community. The SHP's goals revolve around swiftly and consistently improving the health of school children, ensuring that children from early childhood through adolescence maintain optimal health to reach their physical and intellectual potential, and derive significant moral and emotional benefits from healthcare providers, educators, and the school environment (National School Health Policy, 2006).

According to the Ministry of Education, Government of Pakistan and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization UNESCO (2010), two fundamental principles underlie School Health Programmes. Firstly, the integral link between learning quality and students' health conditions, and secondly, the state's responsibility in fostering the seamless physical and mental growth of children, preparing them for productive societal roles in the future. Additionally, in certain contexts, there's a highlighted emphasis on students' potential contribution to disseminating health and hygiene education messages to their families and communities, known as "child-to-child" and "child-to-community" transmission of health-related information.

The World Health Organization (2019) underscores that school health programs serve as strategic tools in preventing significant health risks among children and adolescents while engaging the education sector in efforts to influence behaviours impacting health. Schools are recognized as pivotal institutions, next to families, in providing instruction and experiences that equip young individuals for healthy and productive adult roles. Consequently, schools possess substantial influence in shaping students' health-related behaviours. As such, elementary, middle, and secondary schools represent critical settings for public health initiatives (Kolbe, 2019).

Components of School Health Programme

Sekoni (2012) delineates a foundational model termed the traditional model within school health programs, originating in the early 1900s and evolving until the 1980s. This model, known as the Three-Component Model, embodies the core elements of a school health program: health education, health services, and a health-supportive environment. In the 1980s, an expansion occurred, transforming the three-component model into an eight-component comprehensive school health program. This revised model comprises health education, health services, a healthful school environment, physical education, nutrition services, health promotion for school staff, counseling and psychological services, and parent and community involvement (Allensworth, Lawson, Nicholson, & Wyche 1997). Adamson (2019) further articulates the distinct components within school health programs:

Nutrition Services: Schools play a crucial role in providing access to nutritious meals that meet the diverse health and dietary needs of students. Beyond serving meals, they serve as educational platforms, incorporating classroom-based nutrition and health education. Qualified nutrition professionals oversee these services, ensuring that meals align with nutritional standards and cater to students' well-being. The provision of healthy meals not only supports physical health but also enhances students' cognitive abilities and overall academic performance.

Physical Education: An integral part of school health programs, physical education is designed to equip students with the skills and knowledge necessary for lifelong engagement in physical activities. A well-structured curriculum ensures a sequential learning experience across various activity areas. Quality physical education programs, led by trained instructors, aim to meet national standards. The goal is to produce individuals who are not only physically fit but also possess the confidence and capability to sustain a healthy and active lifestyle.

Health Education: Health education forms the cornerstone of promoting informed decision-making and fostering health-conscious behaviours among students. It encompasses a comprehensive curriculum addressing diverse topics such as substance abuse prevention, mental health, nutrition, physical activity, safety, sexual health, and violence prevention. Through qualified instructors, health education programs aim to cultivate health literacy, empowering students to adopt and advocate for healthier lifestyles.

Health Services: Comprehensive health services within schools ensure accessibility to primary healthcare, disease prevention, and timely intervention for illnesses or emergencies. These services encompass a spectrum of healthcare professionals including physicians, nurses, dentists, health educators, and allied health personnel. Their roles involve not only providing medical care but also fostering a safe and hygienic school environment, controlling communicable diseases, and offering educational opportunities to promote individual, family, and community health.

Counseling & Support Services: Mental, emotional, and social well-being is integral to students' overall health. Counseling services within schools aim to assess, intervene, and provide referrals for students experiencing various challenges. Qualified professionals such as school counselors, psychologists, and social workers offer individual and group support, contributing not only to students' well-being but also to the overall positive atmosphere within the school environment.

Healthy and Safe School Environment: A conducive learning environment extends beyond physical infrastructure. It encompasses the physical surroundings and the psychosocial climate of the school. This component focuses on factors such as a safe school building, appropriate temperature, noise levels, lighting, as well as fostering emotional and social conditions that positively influence students' and staff members' well-being.

Health Promotion for Staff: Supporting the health and well-being of school staff contributes to a healthier school community. Programs encouraging health assessments, education, and fitness activities not only benefit staff members individually but also enhance their commitment to promoting students' health. Positive role modeling by staff members further reinforces healthy behaviours among students.

Family/Community Involvement: Collaboration between schools, parents, and the community creates a holistic approach to students' well-being. Initiatives such as school health advisory councils and community engagement programs foster a supportive environment for the school health program. Active involvement from parents and community resources strengthens the overall impact of health initiatives, ensuring a comprehensive approach to student health and well-being that extends beyond the school premises.

School Health Programme in Nigeria

FRESH, an initiative focusing on improving the health and well-being of school-aged children, can be effectively implemented in Nigeria through a multi-faceted approach. Advocacy for strong policy support at national and regional levels is crucial, involving engagement with policymakers to underscore FRESH's benefits for enhancing student health and educational outcomes. Collaboration with education authorities, including the Ministry of Education, is vital for integrating FRESH into the national curriculum. Comprehensive training programs for school personnel, community engagement to communicate initiative benefits, ensuring necessary infrastructure, establishing robust monitoring and evaluation systems, and partnering with NGOs and international organizations are key strategies. Successful pilot implementations should pave the way for scaling up FRESH across diverse regions in Nigeria, necessitating continued support, funding, and refinement of program strategies (FRESH Partners, 2023a).

The School Health Program (SHP) plays a pivotal role in advancing the health and educational objectives for school-aged children. Its effective execution hinges upon a comprehensive school health policy that establishes the standards and procedures governing its implementation. Nigeria's National School Health Policy (NSHPo) adopted in 2006 serves as a guiding framework toward these goals (Dania & Adebayo, 2019).

Ademokun, Osungbade & Obembe (2014) emphasize that the SHP stands as a critical component within a country's healthcare system. With schools being the primary institutions shaping the development of young individuals globally, they directly engage with over 95 percent of youths aged 5–17 for extensive periods during their formative years. Despite this, Akani, Nkanginieme, & Oruamabo (2001) and Osaiyuwu-Osagiede, & Agbonlahor (2020) note that Nigeria's efforts regarding school health programs have predominantly remained at the policy level with limited implementation within the school environment. They highlight the substantial population of school-age children, around 23 percent of the Nigerian community, underscoring their health as pivotal indicators for a nation's developmental status.

Ekenedo & Ekechukwu (2015) reported from a national study on the school health system in Nigeria conducted by the Federal Ministry of Health, Federal Ministry of Education, and the World Health Organization in 2003 which revealed that significant aspects of school infrastructure: the majority of schools (71%) were located within 5 kilometers of main markets, and a considerable proportion (68%) were situated less than 1 kilometer from busy main roads.

Additionally, a vast majority of schools (94%) boasted good ventilation, with more than two-thirds maintaining satisfactory doors, windows, and adequate lighting. About three-quarters of assessed schools offered recreational facilities, while a quarter had ventilated pit latrines. Access to piped water or boreholes was observed in 46% of schools, and 67% were reported to maintain clean premises.

FRESH Approach to School Health

"Education for All" signifies the universal access of children to quality basic education. It involves establishing a learning environment within schools and educational programs that enables and encourages children to learn. This environment should be child-friendly, promoting their well-being, effective in nurturing their development, and protective of their rights. Creating such an environment is integral to global initiatives aimed at enhancing school accessibility and quality. The World Declaration on Education for All recognizes poor health and malnutrition as significant factors contributing to low school enrollment, absenteeism, poor academic performance, and early dropout rates. Consequently, prioritizing good health, hygiene, and nutrition during school years is crucial for fostering comprehensive basic education for all children (School and Health, 2019). According to the United Nations Children's Fund (2012), the FRESH initiative, an acronym for Focusing Resources on Effective School Health, represents a collaborative framework developed by UNESCO, UNICEF, WHO, and the World Bank. Launched at the World Education Forum in Senegal in April 2000, this approach has yielded positive outcomes. Based on experiences shared by WHO, UNICEF, UNESCO, and the World Bank, there exists a set of cost-effective components pivotal for a comprehensive school health, hygiene, and nutrition program. These components serve as the foundation for collective action to ensure schools prioritize children's health:

1. *Health-Related Policies:* Schools must establish policies ensuring a safe physical environment and a positive psychosocial atmosphere. Addressing issues like student abuse, sexual harassment, school violence, and bullying are imperative elements of such policies.
2. *Safe Water and Sanitation Facilities:* Ensuring access to clean water and adequate sanitation facilities is an initial step in creating a healthy school environment.
3. *Skills-Based Health Education:* Emphasizing the development of knowledge, attitudes, values, and life skills necessary for informed decision-making regarding health, hygiene, and nutrition.

4. *School-Based Health and Nutrition Services*: Schools can effectively deliver essential health and nutritional services, provided these services are simple, safe, familiar, and address prevalent community health concerns

Engaging Stakeholders for Effective School Health Programs: Insights from the FRESH Approach

Stakeholders, broadly defined as individuals or groups invested in a school's success, play pivotal roles in shaping the educational landscape. Their involvement ranges from assuming leadership responsibilities to contributing diverse perspectives and ideas (Warsi, 2018). Harnessing the power of stakeholders be it teachers, the community (comprising parents, community leaders, and religious groups), governmental bodies, or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) stands as a critical tool in fully realizing the objectives set forth by the FRESH approach within school health programs (Taylor, 2019).

The various stakeholders hold distinct roles instrumental in actualizing the FRESH approach within school health programs:

1. *Government's Responsibility*: Government entities at federal, state, and local levels shoulder the responsibility of implementing the School Health Programme within the framework of established policies. This includes setting policy structures, enacting relevant legislation, coordinating program implementation, ensuring adequate funding, and monitoring the program's execution in alignment with policy guidelines (The National School Health Policy, 2006).
2. *Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)*: NGOs serve as key allies in supporting governmental efforts to enrich learning environments. Their contributions span providing financial and technical assistance, particularly in areas of education, health, water supply, sanitation, and agriculture. Their support is integral to the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of School Health Programmes (The National School Health Policy, 2006).
3. *Community Engagement*: Establishing positive interactions between schools and communities forms the bedrock for successful and sustainable school-based health programs. Effective partnerships between schools and communities ensure collective agreement on health issues to address and joint efforts in creating responsive health programs. Involving parents and the broader community enriches health education

outreach, reinforcing messages at home and leveraging additional resources for health promotion (UNESCO, 2019).

4. *Teacher Involvement*: Collaboration between Ministries of Education and Health, as well as between teachers and health workers, is pivotal for successful school health programs. While the health sector oversees children's health, the education sector implements and often funds school-based health initiatives. A coordinated effort between these sectors is vital for enhancing health and learning outcomes. Involving students in policy development and implementation empowers them to actively participate in health promotion activities, facilitating the acquisition of essential knowledge and skills for embracing healthy lifestyles (UNESCO, 2019). This participatory approach aligns with the goals of Education for All.

By engaging these stakeholders, the FRESH approach not only enhances the effectiveness of school health programs but also ensures a comprehensive and sustainable framework for promoting health and learning among students.

Importance of Stakeholders Engagement in FRESH initiative

The success of the FRESH Initiative is fundamentally tied to effective stakeholder engagement across its core components. The collaboration between teachers and health workers, as well as the partnership between the education and health sectors, is paramount for the success of school health programs. FRESH emphasizes the need for coordinated planning and action between these sectors to enhance the health and learning outcomes of children (Aston et al., 2020). Furthermore, the initiative recognizes the crucial role of community partnerships, stressing the importance of positive interactions between schools and communities. Stakeholder engagement, including parents, the private sector, community organizations, and women's groups, is vital for ensuring broad-based agreement on health issues and reinforcing health promotion activities (Kadariya et al., 2023). Additionally, FRESH acknowledges the active participation of pupils, emphasizing their involvement in policy development, creating safer environments, and promoting health. Ultimately, the success of FRESH hinges on comprehensive stakeholder engagement, reflecting a commitment to collaborative efforts for effective and sustainable school health programs (FRESH Partners, 2023b).

Stakeholders encompass a diverse range of individuals and entities, including government bodies, educational institutions, health professionals, communities, parents, and students (Marshall & Marshall, 2018). Their collaboration and commitment are pivotal for the success of FRESH in Nigeria. Effective stakeholders engagement ensures the following:

1. *Facilitates Resource Mobilization*: Engaging stakeholders encourages resource pooling, leveraging various entities' expertise, funding, and support mechanisms to bolster FRESH programs (Khodyakov et al., 2018).
2. *Cultural Sensitivity and Local Relevance*: Nigeria's diverse cultural landscape necessitates localized approaches to health initiatives. Stakeholders provide valuable insights to tailor FRESH interventions, ensuring cultural sensitivity and local relevance (Idoko, 2023).
3. *Enhances Program Acceptance and Compliance*: Involving stakeholders fosters a sense of ownership and commitment, leading to higher acceptance and adherence to FRESH guidelines among schools, communities, and relevant institutions (Bhatti, 2023).

Conclusion

In conclusion, stakeholders engagement emerges as a pivotal factor in directing resources towards fostering effective school health initiatives within the Nigerian context under the FRESH framework. By actively involving stakeholders, including educators, community leaders, parents, and policymakers, in the discourse and implementation of school health programs, the potential for impactful resource allocation amplifies significantly. This collaborative approach not only ensures the efficient utilization of resources but also nurtures a supportive environment for sustaining and innovating school health endeavors. Emphasizing stakeholders engagement as a linchpin in the FRESH initiative not only aligns with global health and education goals but also empowers the Nigerian educational landscape to cultivate healthier, more vibrant learning environments that can yield enduring positive outcomes for both the students and the larger community.

Recommendations

1. Create dedicated forums or committees that include representatives from diverse stakeholders such as educators, parents, healthcare professionals, policymakers, and

- community leaders to actively participate in decision-making processes regarding school health initiatives.
2. Conduct workshops, training sessions, and awareness programs to educate stakeholders about the significance of school health and their role in supporting and advocating for it within their respective domains.
 3. Foster ongoing communication channels among stakeholders to exchange ideas, share best practices, and address challenges in implementing and sustaining school health programs.
 4. Ensure transparency in resource allocation processes, demonstrating how funds and resources are being directed towards specific school health programs. This transparency helps build trust and accountability among stakeholders.
 5. Tailor school health programs to address specific local needs and contexts by actively involving community leaders and members in the planning and implementation stages.
 6. Implement mechanisms for continuous evaluation of school health initiatives. Collect feedback from stakeholders and use this data to refine strategies, ensuring they remain effective and relevant.
 7. Engage policymakers and advocate for policies that prioritize and support comprehensive school health programs. This includes securing necessary funding, institutional support, and integration of health education into the curriculum.
 8. Encourage student participation and leadership in advocating for and implementing health-promoting activities within their schools and communities.
 9. Establish measurable metrics to monitor the progress and impact of school health initiatives regularly. Use this data to demonstrate the effectiveness of stakeholder engagement and make informed decisions for future improvements.
 10. Invest in capacity-building programs for stakeholders, enabling them to take ownership and drive initiatives independently while fostering sustainability.

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