



# Significance of action plans in the development of occupational well-being in the schools of Finland and Estonia

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 17 January 2014

Received in revised form 17 June 2015

Accepted 6 October 2015

Available online 9 October 2015

### Keywords:

Schools

Health

Occupational well-being

## ABSTRACT

This article is part of a long term project “Promoting the Occupational Well-Being of School Staff—Action Research Project in Finland and Estonia, 2009–2014.” The purpose of this article is to describe the significance of action plans in the promotion of the occupational well-being of primary and upper secondary school staff in Finland and Estonia from 2010 to the turn of the year 2011–2012. An electronic open questionnaire was sent to occupational well-being groups in Finland ( $N = 18$ ) and in Estonia ( $N = 39$ ). In Finland, the questionnaire was responded to by 16 ( $n = 16$ ) occupational well-being groups, and in Estonia, by 38 ( $n = 38$ ) groups. The qualitative data were analyzed using the inductive-deductive method and content analysis. The obtained results indicate that the schools had named goals for action plans in all aspects of the promotion of occupational well-being in schools (worker and work, working conditions, professional competence, working community) and that these goals were mainly realized in the schools in a systematic way. Schools felt that the action plan for occupational well-being helped them to set goals for occupational well-being and that the planned actions were realized in a more systematic way than before.

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## 1. Introduction

The promotion of occupational well-being is a central aim in international policies and legislations (Commission of European Communities, 2007; School for Health in Europe, 2008). In Finland (see Government Programme, 2011–2014, 2011; Ministry of Employment and the Economy, 2012) and Estonia (National Health Plan 2009–2020, 2008), the promotion of occupational well-being has been introduced as a political point of focus. For instance, the Finnish National Working Life Development Strategy to 2020 highlights occupational well-being and health. In this strategy, occupational well-being and health are founded on cooperative work occurring in workplaces that are reinforced by skilled occupational health care and up-to-date legislation (Ministry of Employment and the Economy, 2012). For its part, this study addresses those goals in the area of school staff occupational well-being.

In general, international studies have generally approached the topic of occupational well-being of school staff from the point of view of illnesses, problems, or stress factors. For instance, school staff have been studied in terms of work-related stress and occupational burnout (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011; Stoeber & Rennert, 2008), psychiatric morbidity (Morena-Abril et al., 2007), and working conditions (Fernandes & Rocha, 2009). Working in a school is demanding (Webb, Vulliamy, Sarja, Hämäläinen, & Poikonen, 2012). Research by Zurlo, Pes, and Cooper (2007) indicated that teachers can cope with stress best by looking for more sensible working methods, enhancing time management, and dealing with problems instantly as they emerge. Research by Price (2012) found that relationships between school heads and teachers affect satisfaction with work and the entire atmosphere at school. Occupational well-being is also important as it has been found to have an effect on teachers' job retention (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009).

In the future, more and more resources already in existence in working communities and the occupational well-being of staff should be studied from the constructive viewpoint of health promotion, as has been done in this study. For example, action research provides an excellent way to integrate ideas of health

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promotion into communities and expand their influence into practice (Kelly, 2005). Here, the aim is to understand, improve and change the world by means of reflection, data collection, and action. Participation, empowerment, life experience, and critical reflection are at the heart of action research (Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2006). Research is planned so that it empowers participants in their own lives (Burns & Grove, 2009) and is an excellent method for bringing together researchers and practice (Glasson, Chang, & Bidewell, 2008) and communities (Kelly, 2005). Academic researchers must offer competence and resources and utilize collective resources and knowledge offered by different partners (Ponic, Reid, & Frisby, 2010). Action research builds a bridge by disseminating scientific data as well as knowledge and life experience utilized by communities (Savage et al., 2006).

This article describes the significance of “Promotion of School Community Staff’s Occupational Well-Being Action Plans” (hereafter referred to as *action plan*) in Finnish and Estonian primary and upper secondary schools for the development of occupational well-being. It is part of a more extensive action research plan: “Promoting the Occupational Well-Being of School Staff—Action Research Project in Finland and Estonia, 2009–2014” in which the occupational well-being of school staff members consists of four aspects: (1) worker and work; (2) working conditions; (3) professional competence; and (4) working community. The aspect of *worker and work* consists of health, mental and physical workload, personal resources, and the factors that impact them. The aspect of *working conditions* includes the physical operational environment (physical, chemical, and biological factors) and occupational safety. *Professional competence* consists of occupational competence and the possibilities for training and education. The aspect of *working community* includes, for example, the supervision of work, the organization, leadership, social support, and communication (Saaranen, Tossavainen, Turunen, Kiviniemi, & Vertio, 2007). This project was carried out in collaboration with the extensive School for Health in Europe (SHE) program (Saaranen, Tossavainen, Sormunen, Laine, & Turunen, 2015; School for Health in Europe, 2008).

## 2. Purpose and study questions

The purpose of this article is to describe the significance of action plans formulated in primary and upper secondary schools in Finland and Estonia for the development of occupational well-being from 2010 to the turn of the year 2011–2012. The aim of the study is to explain how the set goals for the action plans have been realized and how the action plans support promotion of occupational well-being.

This study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. How the goals recorded in the action plans have been realized in Finnish and Estonian schools as assessed by the schools’ well-being groups?

2. How do action plans support the development of occupational well-being as assessed by the schools’ well-being groups in both countries?

## 3. Methods

### 3.1. Study design

Initially, 21 schools in Finland (with a total of 879 staff) and 40 schools in Estonia (with a total of 1978 staff) participated in the project, with one school opting out immediately at the initial stage. At the initial stage, a baseline survey was carried out using the Well-being at Your Work Index questionnaire (Saaranen, Pertel, et al., 2012, Saaranen, Sormunen, et al., 2012, Saaranen et al., 2015). The questionnaire was filled in by school staff members (teachers, principals, school public health nurses, aides, and other staff members, such as cleaners and cooks). In Finland, the questionnaire was responded to by 486 individuals, and in Estonia, by 1330 individuals (Fig. 1).

Each school was given a summary of their baseline survey results for personal use. Subsequently, an occupational well-being group was established in each school. The occupational well-being groups were made up of four to six individuals from different professional groups, such as teachers, school public health nurses, and cleaning staff. After this, the occupational well-being groups devised an action plan, which was drawn up on a ready-made form, which had been designed by the research group and modified and developed in a regional training session together with the Finnish and Estonian schools. Each school selected a set of the most important goals and actions from the four aspects of occupational well-being (work and worker, working community, working environment, and professional competence). The setting of goals and definition of actions was based on the needs of each school. An example of one specific school is depicted in Table 1. On the basis of the action plan, the occupational well-being groups began to develop occupational well-being in collaboration with the entire school staff. The task of the research group was to guide and recognize development needs in the schools, to provide theoretical information on personal and communal levels, and to integrate practical experiences with theoretical foundations. About one year from the formulation of the action plans and the initial stages of the development work, the realization of the set goals and the significance of the plan for the development work were collected.

### 3.2. Instrument, sample, and data

The set goals of the action plans formulated by the schools, their realization, and the significance of the action plans for the promotion of occupational well-being were collected by means of an electronic open questionnaire, which was developed in cooperation with the Finnish-Estonian research group. In this

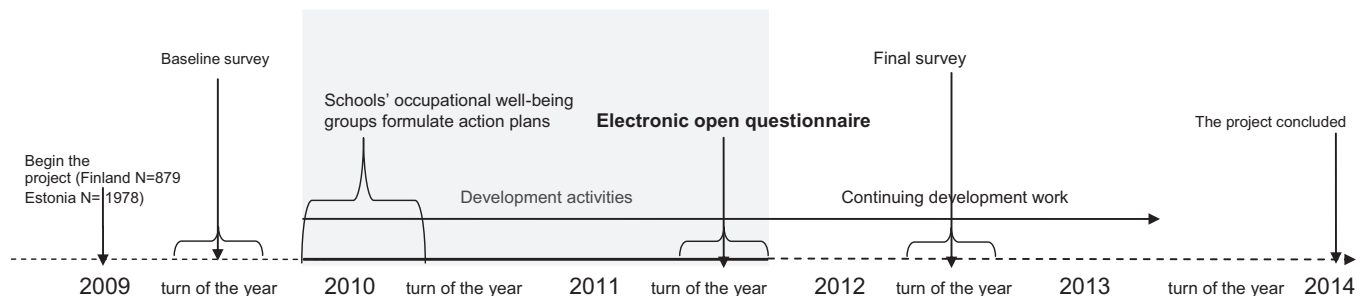


Fig. 1. “Promoting the Occupational Well-Being of School Staff—Action Research Project in Finland and Estonia, 2009–2014” – significance of action plans in the overall account of the venture.

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