



## **Integrating Health Protection and School Health Programme for Effective Emergencies Preparedness and Responses in Nigerian Education Sector**

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### **Abstract**

Health protection and school health programme (SHP) are core areas of public health. Amidst the current challenges facing the Nigerian education sector, especially the primary and secondary education systems, the need to take proactive, evidence-based measures to enhance the quality of a healthy school environment, promotion of child-friendly school environment, quality of teaching and learning, healthy development, the safety of students and school personnel becomes expedient. The paper accentuates the need to integrate health protection and school health programmes for effective emergency preparedness and responses in Nigerian schools. Health protection components of communicable disease control, resilience, and response, environmental public health and emergency preparedness should be integrated with the components of school health programme such as school health services, health education and promotion, healthy school environment and mental health. To achieve the seamless integration of health protection into the SHP for positive outcomes, the authors recommended continuous professional development of health and physical education teachers, school health personnel, school administrators, and education policy and program developers in Nigeria. The authors further recommended a multisectoral approach, adequate resource mobilization/allocation (funds, human resources, and technical assistance) for effective integration to yield expected outcomes, and a review of the National School Health Policy to meet the current health needs of students/pupils in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Health protection, Emergency preparedness, Resilience and response, School health programme, Healthy school environment, Nigeria

### **Introduction**

Integrating health protection and education becomes critical in facing challenges confronting the Nigerian education sector. Additionally, effectively integrating these vital public health areas may offer viable opportunities for revamping school health in Nigerian primary and secondary schools. The integration inadvertently would translate into improved school safety, students' and teachers' well-being.

Health protection and health education are core areas of public health. These core areas are critical for a successful and sustainable school health programme (SHP). A school health programme (SHP) is defined as the totality of projects and activities in a school environment that is designed to protect and promote the health and development of the school community (Ademokun et al., 2014; Federal Ministry of Education [FMoE], 2006). The components of SHP in Nigeria include school health services, health education and



promotion (skilled-based health education), nutrition services, healthy school environment and sanitation (healthful school environment), physical education, counseling, mental health, and social services (FMoE, 2006). Since schools significantly reduce adolescent health risks through effective health education (Li et al., 2022; Yoon et al., 2021; Nagy-Pénczes, Vincze, & Bíró, 2022), the need for an effective National School Health Policy in Nigeria becomes expedient. Hence, the National School Health Policy was formulated in 2006 (FMoE, 2006) as a guide to implementing the SHP.

The goals of the National School Health Policy include enhancing the quality of health in the school community and creating an enabling environment for inter-sectoral partnership in promoting child-friendly school environment teaching and learning and health development. The objectives of the National School Health Policy include providing the necessary legal framework for the mobilization of support for the implementation of the School Health Programme, setting up machinery for the coordination of community efforts with those of government and non-governmental organizations toward the promotion of child-friendly school environments; guide the provision of appropriate professional services in schools by stakeholders for the implementation of the School Health Programme; promote the teaching of skill-based health education; facilitate effective monitoring and evaluation of the School Health Programme; and set up modalities for the sustainability of the School Health Programme (FMoE, 2006).

The attainment of the laudable goals and objectives highlighted in the National School Health Policy has been hampered by numerous challenges facing the Nigerian education sector. Prominent among these challenges include sub-optimal implementation of SHP across the country, gross underfunding of the education sector, a dearth of required infrastructure, shortage of qualified health education teachers, the absence of school health workers, and lack of modern instructional materials (Obembe et al., 2016; Dania, & Adebayo, 2019; Ezeonu et al., 2022). In recent times, emerging threats of insecurity, terrorism, attacks on students/pupils and school personnel, destruction of school infrastructure, kidnappings and killings of students, teachers, and existence of dilapidated facilities have rolled back the achievements and progress made in Nigerian primary and secondary education in the past decades. In the face of the existing and emerging threats, the need to take drastic measures becomes necessary to attain the goals of the National School Health Policy. Such proactive measures include integrating health protection into the school health programme.

### **Health Protection, Emergencies and Preparedness**

Health protection has been variously conceptualized in literature. Health protection is defined as “the protection of individuals, groups, and populations through expert advice and effective collaboration to prevent and mitigate the impact of infectious disease, environmental, chemical, and radiological threats” (Ghebrehewet, Stewart, & Rufus, 2016). The three domains of health protection include communicable disease control, resilience, and response (EPRR), and environmental public health and emergency preparedness (Rubin, 2017). From this definition, it can be inferred that health protection is crucial for mitigating emergencies in Nigerian schools.

An emergency is a severe or dangerous situation, such as an accident, that happens suddenly or unexpectedly and needs immediate action. An emergency is an unexpected and challenging or dangerous situation, especially an accident, which happens suddenly and requires quick action to deal with it (Collins, 2022).



Emergency preparedness involves planning to ensure necessary resources are available in time to meet the anticipated emergency needs. Emergency preparedness comprises the planning and response to disasters. The disasters can include outbreaks of infectious diseases (e.g., COVID-19, monkeypox, Lassa fever, etc.), terrorist attacks, fire outbreaks, building collapse, and so on. In previous decades, emergency preparedness was limited to healthcare settings. However, with the emerging trends of insecurity, terrorism, and attacks on schools, more innovative measures are required to ensure school safety in Nigeria. Therefore, the school health team, which health educators and nurses lead, needs to upscale their skills and capacities to respond to current challenges effectively. The key members of the school health team must develop specific plans to address the school they serve to prioritize resources to address emergencies they may face in an ongoing or continual evaluation and training process.

There are three stages of emergency preparedness. These include emergency planning, emergency response, salvage and recovery (Puryear & Gnugnoli, 2022). Emergency planning encompasses planning and risk assessment. Planning includes care, evacuation, and environmental planning, and response standards. The UN implemented the Sendai Framework in March 2015, emphasizing the "reduction of disaster risks, preventing new risks, limiting existing disaster risks, strengthening community and global disaster resilience (Carabine, 2015)." Risk assessment identifies high-priority and vulnerability areas and directs mitigation efforts. Risk assessment aims to identify the possible disasters that challenge the area, including internal and external disasters, collect resource inventory, identify a facility or region's vulnerabilities based on location and resources, and generate a priorities list.

The response phase focuses on executing the disaster plan. Emergency response encompasses facility level (in this context, the school level) and regional and national planning. The initial primary concern is fulfilling the basic humanitarian needs of the population affected and limiting the loss of life. Types of medical care will ultimately depend on the disaster type. A substantial task within the response phase is coordinating efforts between a facility and regional response, particularly when the demand has exceeded the facility's capacity. There is a need for a National Response Framework that serves as a national response to disasters and explains local, state, and federal responsibilities, which can be integrated into the response process (Holloway et al., 2014). The National Response Framework in Nigeria should include schools as critical areas.

The salvage and recovery phases occur after determining the initial response, and the immediate threat to human life is under control, Response refers to putting the school's plans into place to effectively respond to an emergency event and provide for the immediate needs of students and staff. The recovery phase encompasses collaborating with community partners and other stakeholders in education and public health sectors to restore educational programming; the physical environment; business operations; and social, emotional, and behavioral health staff and students/pupils. For instance, if the school is responding to an infectious disease outbreak (e.g., COVID-19 or human monkey pox), additional prevention activities may need to be conducted to halt the spread of the disease, such as isolation of sick students (quarantine). After the situation has been salvaged or placed under effective control, recovery activities can be conducted. For instance, the school can identify what novel prevention activities could be initiated against future occurrence of disease outbreak.



## **Implications of health protection and school health programme For School Health Policy and Practice**

To ensure effective integration of health protection and SHP, the school authorities and health team must collaborate within and outside the school with public health and safety experts. Schools need additional resources to support the physical, social, and emotional health of their students and personnel as they continue to navigate the challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and insecurity in Nigeria. Improving school safety to high quality, can help address the low school enrolment and high drop-out rates for people at increased risk for insecurity. The current challenges in the school environment create a need for health and safety education models to be increasingly flexible and include more multidimensional strategies that extend beyond the SHP. Cross-sector collaboration is critical to bridging the gap between the current school-based health education and the safety of students and other school personnel. Collaborating to provide financial and technical support and resources, could equip schools and communities with the knowledge, skills, and ability to make accurate decisions and prepare and respond to emergencies effectively.

## **Conclusions**

Health protection is the protection of individuals, groups, and populations through the effectual working together of public health experts to identify, prevent, and mitigate the impacts of infectious diseases and environmental, chemical, and radiological threats. It is a subset of public health, which aims at preventing disease, prolonging life, and promoting health through the organized efforts of society. Similarly, the school health programme is the totality of projects and activities in a school environment that is designed to protect and promote the health and development of the school community. Therefore, health protection and school health programme are core areas of public health. The emergence of several threats to personnel, students/pupils, and infrastructure in the school environments requires drastic but effective measures. One of the effective measures is to effectively integrate these two core areas of public health into one entity in the school curriculum to prevent or mitigate these emerging threats. To effectively integrate these core areas of public health, actions such as multisectoral collaboration among public health experts, training of school health professionals to enhance capacity for effective implementation of integrated programme, a multidisciplinary approach to evaluation of the current health education curriculum framework and provision of financial and material incentives become expedient. Such a revised curriculum should meet the health and safety needs of the children, school personnel, and the school's overall safety. In addition, stakeholders in the education section should implement policies that strengthen the integration of health protection and SHP for effectiveness. Also, school authorities and Ministries of Health and Education need to implement capacity-building programmes for the school team to enable them to respond effectively to emergencies. These efforts will create a health-promoting school that constantly strengthens its capacity as a healthy living, learning, and working setting.

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