

Taking a systems approach – what does it mean for interventions and evaluations?

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Health promotion in schools and communities has predominantly focused on programs and activities to change individuals' behaviours with limited success. We, amongst others, have argued that what is needed is a systems thinking approach to achieve more efficient, equitable and longer lasting effects. A systems thinking approach challenges us to think differently about the nature of interventions and how they might be evaluated. Rather than focusing on individual behaviour change, a systems intervention requires thinking about and capturing what structures, relationships, resources, networks are changing in the system. Evaluating a systems intervention means: (1) a change of focus from individual outcomes to systems processes, impacts and outcomes; (2) capturing the dynamic nature of the systems and activities that are developed, including local adaptation; and (3) feeding back the evaluation data to contribute to the ongoing development and implementation of the intervention. Thus the intervention and evaluation are entwined not independent and the evaluation design needs to be developmental or flexible. Neither the complexity of the evaluation nor the use of a developmental approach requires the development of new data collection methods. What is required is that we look at the data differently, to interrogate the background, contextual variation, for example, as stringently as we look at the more usual 'foreground' process and impacts of the intervention. This presentation will use examples drawing on our experience in designing, implementing and evaluating complex interventions in communities and schools to explore the challenges this presents.