Testing the 'zero-sum game' hypothesis: An examination of school health policy and practice and inequalities in educational outcomes

Background: There is recognition that health and education are intrinsically linked, through for example the World Health Organizations' Health Promoting Schools' (HPS) framework. Nevertheless, promoting health via schools is seen by some as a 'zero-sum game'; that is, schools have nothing to gain, and in fact may experience detriments to the core business of academic attainment as a result of focusing resources on health. Crucially, there is a paucity of evidence around the impacts of health and well-being policy and practice on attainment, with recent Cochrane reviews highlighting this gap. This study explored the 'zero-sum game' hypothesis among schools with varying levels of deprivation; that is, the role of health and wellbeing interventions in schools in reducing, or widening, socioeconomic inequality in educational attainment.

Methods: Wales-wide, school-level survey data on health policies and practices, reflective of the HPS framework, were captured in 2016 using the School Environment Questionnaire (SEQ). SEQ data were linked with routinely collected data on academic attainment. Primary outcomes included attendance and attainment at Key Stages 3 and 4. Interaction terms were fitted to test whether there was an interaction between FSM, overall HPS activity, and outcomes. Linear regression models were constructed separately for high (>15% of pupils) and low (<15%) Free School Meal (FSM) schools, adjusting for confounders.

Findings: The final analyses included 48 low and 49 high FSM secondary schools. Significant interactions were observed between FSM and overall HPS for KS3 attainment (b=0.28; 95% CI: 0.09, 0.47) and attendance (b=0.05; 95% CI: 0.02, 0.09), reflecting an association between health improvement activities and education outcomes among high, but not low FSM schools. There was no significant interaction for KS4 attainment (b=0.18; 95% CI: -0.22, 0.57).

Interpretation: Our findings did not support the 'zero-sum game' hypothesis; in fact, among more deprived schools, there was a tendency for better attendance and attainment at Key Stage 3. Schools must equip students with the skills required for good physical, mental health and well-being in addition to academic and cognitive skills. The study
included a large, nationally representative sample of secondary schools; however, the cross-sectional nature has implications for causality.
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**Contributors**
SJL is an early career researcher. GFM conceived and designed the study. SJL and GFM analysed and interpreted the data. SJL drafted the manuscript and all authors contributed to the revisions of the manuscript and approved the final draft for submission.

**Competing Interests**
The authors wish to declare no conflicts of interest.

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Interpretation: Our findings did not support the ‘zero-sum game’ hypothesis; in fact, among more deprived schools there was a tendency for better attendance and attainment at Key Stage 3. Whilst implementing school health improvement was not associated with educational attainment in more affluent schools, in poorer schools there was a tendency for better education outcomes. Schools must equip students with the skills required for good physical, mental health and well-being in addition to academic and cognitive skills. The study included a large, nationally representative sample of secondary schools in Wales; however, the cross-sectional nature has implications for causality.

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