

Symposium A5: Health Policy Research in Nursing

How a Comparative Case Study of School-Based Health Services Can Inform State Level Policy Development in Children's Health and Mental Health Issues

Esther Seibold, DNSc, RN, University of Massachusetts Boston, Boston, MA

Purpose: By comparing the organizational structures of two elementary schools, this study examined their effects on school-based health mental health services and established a framework for understanding how policies related to school health and mental health services are executed.

Background: With children increasingly presenting with both diagnosable mental health disorders and other behavior disorders, schools face increased challenges for managing the mental health issues of their students and maximizing their educational experience. The literature, however, lacks an examination of the organizational factors that shape how schools manage this critical issue.

Methods: Occurring in the same state, a comparative case study of two elementary schools' approaches to managing mental health issues of students within their organizations was conducted using an organizational, systems based model as an organizing framework. The study included interviews with administrators, teachers, staff, and the school nurse. Observational sessions at each location also shaped the data collection process. General thematic coding structured the analytic approach.

Results: Both cases found that the nature of school leadership and the school nurse shaped the management of the mental health services offered by the school. The school nurse, in particular, had either a proactive or reactive role in addressing mental health issues. Furthermore, interdisciplinary collaboration in addressing health and mental health issues varied between the cases. Despite operating under the same state policies of health and mental health services, the organizational culture dictated two distinct approaches to managing these services.

Conclusions and Implications: Of particular interest were the fact that the delivery of health and mental services was influenced primarily by organizational structures and culture within the school building (especially with the school nurse's role), rather than following district or state policy guidelines. Findings inform how school mental health policies should be shaped to account for these factors.