
Introduction to the Special Issue - Renewing a Vision: The Critical Role for Schools in a New Mental Health Strategy for Children and Adolescents

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Abstract

This special issue of the *Canadian Journal of School Psychology* examines the vision and the capacity of schools to be strategically positioned as a hub for service delivery in meeting the mental health needs of Canada's children and youth. Canada's leading researchers and practitioners are represented in this contribution that addresses issues ranging from the extent of the need and the stigma of mental health challenges to the critical role of teachers in program and service implementation. It concludes with contributions of the current status of Canadian school-based mental health services along with a commentary on a vision for a holistic service delivery model for children and youth at risk. As the guest editors, we trust that this compilation will serve as a signpost for the future of school-based mental health service advocacy and development.

Résumé

Cet numéro spécial du *Canadian Journal of School Psychology* examine la vision ainsi que la capacité des écoles d'être stratégiquement positionner comme un centre pour la livraison des services qui correspondre aux besoins des jeunes Canadiens dans la domaine de la santé mentale. Les chercheurs et praticiens éminents Canadiens sont représentés dans cet contribution qui s'intéresse aux problèmes variés de

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l'entendue du besoin et le stigmatisme des défis de la santé mentale au rôle critique des enseignants dans la mise en œuvre des programmes et services. Il conclut avec les contributions de la situation actuelle des services scolaires Canadiens dans le domaine de la santé mentale, ainsi qu'un commentaire d'une vision pour un modèle de livraison des services pour les enfants et les jeunes à risque. Comme éditorialistes invités, nous avons confiance que cette compilation servira comme indicateur pour l'avenir du développement et promotion des services scolaires dans le domaine de la santé mentale.

Keywords

school-based mental health strategies, children's mental health

This past year of 2012 marked the 25th anniversary of the first in the series of seminal epidemiologic investigations by Dan Offord et al. (1987) chronicling the prevalence and incidence of mental health disorders within Canada's child and adolescent population.

The now commonly cited "1 in 5" statistic reflecting the rate of mental health disorders within this population has been used not only as a baseline indicator for reporting on the emotional well-being of the country's child and adolescent population, but also the relative inability of the traditional children's services sector to deliver programs with the capacity and timeliness to address what the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) identified as the "orphan within the orphan of mental health services in general."

Looking Ahead

While the Offord et al. (1987) findings continue to concern practitioners, researchers, and policy makers alike, there lies hope that a renewed interest in finding alternatives to traditional service delivery systems will both help prevent the mental health challenges faced by children and adolescents and respond effectively to these young people and their families. Among the most exciting areas of development is the movement emphasizing school-based mental health services.

The need for proactive solutions to more effectively address all aspects of children's mental health needs is clearly evident and it is equally apparent that there is a vital role being played by our schools. Recent data from Canada obtained as part of the World Health Organization's cross-national study indicated that the majority of young people in Canada feel supported by their schools and have a sense of belonging. Another clear finding of this investigation was that positive school environments and high levels of teacher support were related robustly to positive mental health (see Freeman et al., 2011). But this comprehensive study also led to the conclusion that school is not a positive place for a small but significant proportion of Canadian youth.

It was found that more than one quarter of boys and girls in Canada wish they were “someone else” and analyses by school grade level established that mental health is clearly a significant concern as children move through Grades 6 to 10. Particularly alarming was the finding that one fifth of boys and more than one third of girls reported that they feel depressed at least once a week (Freeman et al., 2011). Thus, it is apparent that much work remains to be done.

In their policy-oriented article focused on school-based mental health promotion in Ontario, Santor, Short, and Ferguson (2009) identified four essential priorities that must be emphasized in order for progress to occur on a broad scale: (a) A recognition among school boards and educators that acting to improve mental health and reduce substance abuse problems is a priority; (b) Development of the capacity to select evidence-based programs that are well suited to local schools and the communities where they are located; (c) An unprecedented high degree of collaboration and cooperation among school boards, educators, community-based mental health and substance abuse programs, parents, and other stakeholders; and (d) A continuing commitment to communities and school boards working together to create the required resources and skills needed, along with a commitment to promoting collaborative research ventures. Working toward these priorities should not only promote better adjustment among our younger people, it should also help reduce levels of bullying and violence.

This special issue presents a most timely compendium of research and practice recommendations to further address the growing concern regarding the social, emotional, and psychological well-being of our young people, with unprecedented efforts in Canada and elsewhere emerging in response to these challenges. For example, in July 2010, we were introduced to *Evergreen: A Child and Youth Mental Health Framework for Canada*, a project undertaken by the Child and Youth Advisory Committee of the Mental Health Commission of Canada (see MHCC, 2010). This project includes a framework that identifies 15 strategic directions for mental health promotion, including several that pertain directly to schools and school personnel.

Theme of This Special Issue

One of our goals for this special issue is that it serves as a further impetus for system-wide mental health promotion and prevention efforts in school systems in Canada and elsewhere. The papers have direct implications for our attempts to reduce mental health problems and improve levels of emotional, interpersonal, and academic functioning. The most recent evidence for the effectiveness of mental health promotion in our schools cannot be denied and what is needed now is broad, evidence-based implementation.

Useful insights about effective practices were provided by Weare and Nind (2011) based on their meta-review of 52 existing reviews and meta-analyses on school mental health promotion. They found small to moderate effect sizes in conventional statistical terms but large effect sizes in terms of “real world” impact. Weare and Nind (2011) described the key elements of school mental health promotion programs leading to

positive change: (a) a clear focus on positive mental health, (b) a balance of universal and targeted approaches, (c) implementation of long-term as opposed to short-term preventions in order to sustain improvements, and (d) the adoption of a whole school approach that reflects changes in the curriculum with clear linkages to student learning and teacher education.

Articles in This Special Issue

The invited articles in this special issue of the *Canadian Journal of School Psychology* bring together leading Canadian researchers and practitioners who are viewing the broadest possible means through which schools can play an active role in addressing the mental health needs of our young people. The current volume addresses many of these themes by highlighting contemporary school mental health issues and offering some clear solutions. Taken together, these articles reflect our conviction that schools have an essential role to play in not only assessment, intervention, and prevention but also in engagement and meaningful involvement of local communities. Clearly, we must all work together to address mental health issues involving children, adolescents, and their family members.

Flett and Hewitt begin this issue by presenting the argument that psychological problems in youth are actually underestimated because of subthreshold conditions that do not meet diagnostic criteria, yet involve substantial distress and impairment. This subset of children and adolescents experience profound distress yet hide their problems as they fly “under the radar” because of a personality style characterized by self-concealment and a tendency to engage in perfectionistic self-presentation. Given this chronicling of the underreporting and under detection of psychological problems, schools have a vitally important role in mental health promotion as it holds the promise of being a proactive system-wide preventive intervention led by school mental health counsellors.

The MHCC in its inaugural report, *Out of the Shadows Forever* (MHCC, 2007), identified the issue of social and self stigma in mental health as among its first goals to address in creating a national dialogue regarding mental illness. The following two reviews highlight this added issue of marginalization and stigmatization that further complicate the delivery of mental health services.

Hartman, Michel, Winter, Young, Flett, and Goldberg describe self and social stigma in high school–age youth in reporting on their attempts to address the issue of adolescent-onset schizophrenia. This research indicates that while the negative consequences of social stigma represents a significant barrier to persons acknowledging their disorder and seeking treatment, individuals with mental illness internalize negative stereotypes about themselves, referred to as self-stigma. This fact is most closely associated with a reluctance to seek needed treatment. The challenge to overcome mental illness stigma has led to the development of global anti-stigma initiatives that effectively engage young people in school-based programs. Results related to a program to address stigma in relation to schizophrenia in high schools is summarized.

There has been a tendency to view those students who present as challenges to the normal order of schools and learning as not ‘belonging’ within the traditional academic framework. Students with mental health challenges could and have been viewed as falling within this exceptional group. The second article in the area of marginalization and stigma by Specht capitalizes on decades of research and experience in the area of exclusion of certain learners within the school who have been identified as exceptional. Specht proposes that students who are excluded from the daily life of schools are themselves at risk for mental illness, and this is especially true for children with disabilities as they are marginalized by assumptions and beliefs about what they cannot do at school as opposed to what they can do. Specht proposes that a new vision of the role of school psychologists could address this tendency in suggesting a move away from the tradition of assessment-focused categorizing and labeling of students, to a role in supporting classroom teachers in promoting successful academic, social, and emotional strategies to assist teachers in inclusive classrooms.

Clearly, teachers represent the most vital resource in whatever strategies are endorsed within the school system. This holds true for efforts that range from improving academic outcomes to promoting nonviolence. Hence with schools becoming part of the frontline of child and youth mental health services, a review of current strategies in school-based mental health would be incomplete without exploring the role and need of these professionals

Whitley, Smith, and Vaillancourt take up the specific issue of teacher preparedness in discussing mental health literacy among educators. This review article examines teacher preparedness in mental health literacy as well as identifying the various approaches that have been taken or are underway to improve literacy. While ongoing professional learning for teachers and all school staff is clearly warranted, these authors suggest that many of the current initiatives tend to be single-day workshops that are less effective than the more intensive system-wide efforts that capitalize on existing evidence and teacher’s self report of what they need. A specific focus on bullying is also highlighted.

In their article, Vesely, Saklofske, and Leschied examine teachers and their effectiveness in promoting student outcomes within the framework of emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence encompasses an array of emotional competencies that facilitate the identification, processing, and regulation of emotion and is viewed as a useful lens through which to characterize teacher abilities. This fact emphasizes that effective teaching demands skills beyond the conveyance of academic knowledge and requires emotion-related competencies. An appreciation for emotional intelligence holds the potential to improve teacher psychological well-being as well as increase their efficacy and thus ultimately influence student and classroom outcomes. It is argued that if teachers are expected to meet and support the emotional needs of their students, it is incumbent on the larger system to in turn support them.

Two articles focus on program implementation in school-based mental health services. Kutcher and Wei report on one of the most extensive school-based mental health programs currently applied in Canada, the School-Based Pathway to Care model. This

model engages students, teachers, student service providers, parents/families, health care providers, and the wider community through various training programs. It emphasizes the importance of both formal and informal linkages between the school, community, and health providers. Preliminary evaluation of the model reveals promising outcomes for its application in secondary schools within the broader framework of enhancing system capacity for addressing the mental health needs of students.

A more specific example of program implementation is presented by Millar, Lean, Moraes, Sweet, and Nelson who describe the innovative Psychology School Mental Health Initiative, a school-based mental health service. Its purpose is to proactively address students' mental health problems using cognitive-behavioural intervention. Cognitive-behavioural intervention is delivered through various means, including active discussions, case examples, and interactive activities. The intervention is focused on students suffering from anxiety. The Psychology School Mental Health Initiative has met with initial success according to several criteria, including the capacity of school-based psychology staff to provide a high-quality intervention, the greater awareness and understanding that teachers and administrators had of available services, and most notably, the increased number of students and families receiving an intervention in school settings.

The final two articles examine the school-based organizational structure and commitment that are needed to effect the positive changes required in promoting "healthy children." Manion, Short, and Ferguson begin their article by summarizing the important work of The School-Based Mental Health and Substance Abuse Consortium, a group composed of 40 leading Canadian researchers, policy makers, and practitioners acting in consort with MHCC in providing a comprehensive review of the current state of mental health and substance use programs and practices in Canadian schools. Five areas are covered that address the organizational conditions required for effective school mental health at the provincial, district, and school/community level; what an investment in evidence-informed mental health promotion/social emotional learning initiatives looks like; the necessity for systematic professional learning in mental health for educators, parents, and students; the requirement for rigorous evaluation of untested but research-informed approaches; and the necessity for partnerships at the school and community level.

The final article by Schwean and Rodger revisits the broad and overarching topic of service delivery challenges in meeting the needs of children and youth with mental health disorders. While it is distressing to realize an incidence rate that reflects close to one million young people in Canada will experience a diagnosable mental health disorder, less than 4% of this identified group will actually receive a service that is directly related to their needs. Schwean and Rodger provide reasons why the traditional service delivery system is inherently unable to address these youth and their families in timely and effective ways and then present evidence to support the means by which schools can serve as the hub in a reformed children's service delivery system.

As guest editors of this special issue focusing on school-based mental health, it has been a joy to work with the dedicated and talented researchers who are represented in this volume. There is much to be excited about in our field of child and youth mental health. We trust these articles will serve as a useful summary of where the field is now, but more important, as a signpost for where we are heading.

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