

Engaging in Cross-Discipline Collaborative Training for School Counselors and School Nurses

Meeting the Mental Health Crisis in Schools

Schools are bracing for a mental health crisis, with students experiencing increasing rates of mental health issues exacerbated by childhood poverty, COVID-19, and ongoing racial discrimination and oppression. These experiences impact students' academic, career, personal/social development, and physical health into adulthood. Early identification of student needs are vital and many students do not receive care outside of the school setting. This project attempted to increase student access to school health care through cross-discipline training between school nurses and school counselors. Both professions are essential in providing needed student care, yet research and training regarding collaboration is lacking.

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Author Note:

This project was funded by the Josiah H. Macy's Foundation President's Grant

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KEYWORDS

antiracism, research, evaluation, social justice, counselor education

Introduction

K-12 schools are encountering a mental health crisis as students needing mental health care exceed schools' ability to provide services. The complexity of student health needs continues to increase over the past years, which include physical health, mental health, and social factors that influence overall health (Bitsko, et al., 2018). In the United States, a reported one in six children exhibit mental health symptoms (Cree, et al., 2018), and schools are one of the largest providers of mental health care (Green et al., 2013). The effects of COVID-19 likely exacerbated mental health needs in children (Duan et al., 2020; Panchal, et al., 2020; Swick & Powers, 2018). School closures and social isolation affected all students, but particularly minoritized students and those living in poverty (LaFave, 2020; Moss et al., 2020; National Center for Educational Statistics, n.d.). Additionally, the uncertainty created by the pandemic including the loss of family, structure and routine inconsistencies, in-person school to virtual learning, and a lack of social outlets increased student mental health concerns like anxiety and depression. Moreover, when schools switched to virtual formats, mental health services also became remote (Krogstad et al., 2020; LaFave, 2020; Moss et al., 2020).

When exploring adverse childhood experiences (ACEs; Burke-Harris, 2018), Cronholm et al., (2015), Felitti et al. (1996), and van der Kolk (2014) highlighted the ways in which these traumatic exposures and pediatric adversities can impact both physical and mental health. Early identification within the school system allows for the provision of needed mental health care, which include interventions that can assist in buffering early risk factors such as discrimination, poverty, and other societal problems that negatively impact child development (Author et al., n.d.; Blaustein & Kinnibugh; 2018; Ray et al., 2022; Sanders et al., 2020). Pediatric adversity impacts children's physical, social-emotional, academic, and career development (Burke-Harris, 2018; Cronholm et al., 2015; Felitti et al., 1996, and van der Kolk 2014).

As school counselors focus on children's academic, career, and social emotional development (American School Counseling Association [ASCA], 2020), it is vital that they address mental health difficulties within schools. ASCA (2022) tasked school counselors with interprofessional collaboration to best support the needs of students in schools. One example of such interprofessional collaboration is with school nurses, who are at the forefront of this health crisis. As many students present with somatic complaints that indicate mental health concerns, these students are often first seen within the school nurse office (Ellertsson et al., 2017; Hoscotte, 2023). School nurses are members of the school health team with expertise on the intersection of physical and mental health, though research on school nurse and school counselor collaborations is lacking.

NEED FOR SPECIALIZED TRAINING

School nurses can play a key role in better identifying social, behavioral, and academic inequities, and addressing them with the youth and their families. Approximately 30% of student health visits to school nurses are for mental health concerns, often disguised by headaches and stomachaches (Foster et al, 2005). This pattern is especially true for minority children who are more likely to present to the school nurse than attempt to engage the school counselor or mental health services directly (Foster et al., 2005; Mason et al., 2021; Mayes & Byrd, 2022). Yet, in a 2008 study, nearly 80% of Washington D.C. public school nurses reported that they did not feel adequately trained in mental health to provide the necessary services (Acosta Price & Graham Lear, 2008). In a review of the literature examining school nurse roles in child mental health, Ravenna and Cleaver (2016) found that a key component of school nursing includes supporting and coordinating student mental health. However, multiple barriers existed for school nurses to provide such care due to inadequate training and a lack of confidence in their skills (Ravenna & Cleaver, 2016).

Additionally, despite ASCA's (2022) call for interprofessional collaboration, extant literature rarely explores school counselor and school nursing collaboration (Cogan & Kiefner, 2019). This project aims to train school nurses in identification, assessment, brief intervention, and referral of mental health concerns within the school system to improve self-advocacy in mental health care. Despite school nurses and counselors being at the epicenter of mental health within school systems, there is little research on partnerships and collaborations between the two professions (Cogan & Kiefner, 2019). These two professions are critical to the health and wellbeing of students and are not involved in academic or discipline services, thus alleviating some of the power differentials between school professionals and students and allowing for more authentic and engaging relationships. Additionally, both professions promote connections through intentional relationship building, are guided by the principles of confidentiality, and focus on the wellbeing of the whole school. Together, they can jointly manage student mental health needs by creating built in systems for assessment and referral.

By improving access to training within educational systems, we aim to improve school nurse engagement in mental health needs within the school system in order to foster cross-professional collaboration. It is vital for training programs to increase mental health education as well as provide cross-discipline collaboration to ensure nursing students are equipped to provide necessary services for students as soon as they enter the workforce. Through training and collaboration, school nurses will be better equipped to address the growing health inequities within educational systems. Similarly, school counselors will better identify physical health needs of students and collaborate with school nurses in proper identification and support for students who experience adversities that may otherwise be unknown to school counselors. Through collaboration both in training and in practice, school nurses and school counselors can better address student mental health needs within the school system as they work together to identify, assess, treat, and refer students for necessary mental health treatment. Both professions place the health and safety of children as their top priority, however, often are isolated from each other within the school system. As school counselor training is housed

within counselor education programs, it is vital for counselor educators to examine how to expand training to include school nurses to enhance the emotional health of children.

Increasing Collaborative Training among School Personnel

To address this isolation and gap in training, two professors, one within counselor education and one within the school of nursing, explored the effectiveness and feasibility of in-school didactic and experiential mental health training of school nurses and school counselors. Due to the double trauma of COVID-19 and discrimination, early identification of mental health needs is essential, and treatment must meet the developmental, cultural, and trauma-based needs of students served. Ultimately, the cross-disciplinary training is the first step in expanding interdisciplinary mental health education to place-based care for students. It stems beyond the typical confines of an academic medical and university setting, and places public health and mental health of children and adolescents into the curricula of nursing and school counseling students.

Using empirically-supported training programs including *Mental Health Training Intervention for Health Providers in Schools* (MH-TIPS; Bohnenkamp et al., 2019) and *Child-Teacher Relationship Training* (Morrison & Helker, 2010) adapted from Child-Parent Relationship Training (Bratton & Landreth, 2019), this collaboration provided school nurses with necessary training on the identification of mental health concerns in children and didactic knowledge developmentally appropriate mental health assessment. It also provided training on the experiential awareness of effective communication with children and families to best meet their mental health needs. Additionally, school nursing faculty educated future school counselors in recognizing the ways in which adversity and oppression impact children's physiological development. This curriculum provided didactic training and experiential learning based upon Kolb's learning theory (1984) to enhance reflection and integration of material into new situations (Poore et al., 2015).

The purpose of this project was two-fold. By combining a Pediatric Adversity nursing course and Comprehensive Counseling Program course, we addressed the real need for collaborations across disciplines within elementary and secondary schools. Ultimately, this was the first step in expanding interdisciplinary mental health education to school-based care for students. The capacities of nursing and education faculty together enhanced their combined ability to address inequities in health and education outcomes evident in the United States.

To meet the need for increased mental health education and collaboration within the school system, we first addressed the identified gaps within school nurse mental health training and school counselors' provision of support through collaboration within the school nursing and school counseling programs. The training recognized the diverse needs of students and

ways in which trauma, adversity, and oppression can impact student behavior and emotional needs within the school system. We offered both didactic learning through video lectures, guest speakers, course discussions, and experiential learning through case presentations and collaborative case identification to engage students in co-learning opportunities.

We included the following information within the crossover courses (NURS 6215 Pediatric Adversity and Early Childhood Development and Health; CNSL 6477 Coordination of Comprehensive Counseling Programs). We provided these lessons synchronously and asynchronously to assist students with diverse learning needs. Students enrolled within these courses gained experiential training on: (a) communication with children to address mental health concerns, (b) brief mental health interventions, and (c) appropriate referrals. Within their two courses, we addressed the following topics:

1. Developmentally informed symptomatology of mental difficulties
2. Trauma's influence on children's emotional and behavioral expression in schools
3. Impact of systemic racism on emotional and behavioral expression in schools
4. Identification of trauma in school systems
5. Brief mental health assessments in schools
6. Developmentally appropriate communication skills to meet the mental health needs of students
7. School nurse and counselor scope of practice
8. Discerning somatic complaints and mental health issues
9. Coordination of care amongst school professionals
10. Ethical issues in assessment and provision of mental health services
11. Psychotropic medications and interactions
12. Equity and access to mental health care within the school system.

This project provided essential collaboration to provide necessary communication, culmination of knowledge, and increased awareness into the professional identities and roles of two vital school professions. By creating cross-professional communication and knowledge and increased collaboration across these health professions, students benefited from increased access to trauma- and diversity-informed mental health care within the school system.

Reflexivity and Classroom Impacts

We are aware of the heightened emotional impacts of exploring pediatric adversity and adverse childhood experiences (Stone et al., 2023). To that end, we attempted to expose students to the content in ways that scaffolded the experiences and avoided flooding students with intense emotions. We also attempted to reflect upon the ways in which racism, discrimination, and oppression influence children's experiences of adversity, and the longitudinal impacts of those experiences on child development. To do so, we addressed their own privileges and positionality and encouraged students to explore those aspects to model awareness, acceptance, and exploration of identity. This approach better enabled both school nurses and school counselors in effectively engaging cross-culturally with parents and students who share many differing identities. However, because both educators were not practicing within the school system, the proximity of working within schools was lacking.

Additional considerations include applying the material for nursing students beyond the school setting. Many nursing students did not plan to engage as a school nurse or were not exposed to the school settings. To actively engage school counseling and nursing, we: (a) identified materials to advocate for placing nurses within the school system, and (b) identified the importance of school counselors engaging with medical professionals to better understand the holistic needs of the students with whom they work. By expanding beyond school nurses, students in both disciplines may recognize the benefits of collaboration. Additionally, through identification of the benefits of employing school nurses, school counseling students can better advocate for their students through exploration with school boards and administrators on how to employ full time school nursing staff.

Evaluation of Effectiveness

As a result of this training, students became uniquely situated to collaborate with school nurses and counselors within their future schools to further increase the positive impact on the mental health needs of students. Through this project, we hoped to increase school nursing students' knowledge and self-efficacy for engaging in mental health discussions and assessments with students and school counselors. Furthermore, we aimed to increase school counseling students' knowledge and awareness of somatic complaints of mental health, connections between physical and mental health symptoms, and the role of physical health in student development. Professional skills related to key objectives of the cross-discipline collaboration were discussed in class, including diversity considerations, somatization of mental health, physical health and student development, and common physical concerns of students.

We also informally investigated students' professional skills related to key objectives of the cross-discipline collaboration, including diversity considerations, mental health assessment, trauma indicators, brief mental health interventions, symptoms necessitating referrals, roles of school counselors, and collaboration with families.

Informal data gathered from in-class discussions, course evaluations, and assignments indicated students felt better prepared to meet the mental health needs of students within the school system. Nursing students also noted increased comfort in collaborating with school counselors in their future work within the schools. Additionally, school counseling students reported increased collaboration with school nurses within their internship sites, demonstrated increased comfort in assessing mental health versus medical issues with students, and an increased desire to collaborate with school nurses in the future. School nursing students appreciated the awareness of behavioral presentations of trauma, while school counseling students identified the medical presentation of trauma as uniquely beneficial for their own training. Students identified the lectures centering on the vital roles that school nurses and school counselors play within student mental health as particularly beneficial across programs.

Implications

Throughout the seven weeks of the course, we created seven lectures to engage cross-discipline collaboration and engaged students in case conceptualizations and discussions to further facilitate cross-discipline learning. The qualitative data stemming from student assignments and discussions provided rich information for future implementation of this collaboration. We will continue to provide opportunities for cross-discipline engagement and learning, allowing for in person learning, to continue to increase nursing students' self-efficacy in engaging in mental health discussions and further utilize school counseling students to assist nursing students' awareness of school culture. This project will further inform medical education and counselor education through publications in academic journals detailing this collaboration. We will continue to solicit feedback and data from students involved in this collaboration and incorporate their comments and feedback into future collaborations.

The mental health needs of students are vast and extend beyond the ability of a single school health professional. Through collaboration of nursing and counselor education faculty, students' ability to address health and education inequities was enhanced. By collaborating across disciplines, school nurses and counselors can better identify, assess, and provide services for students who may otherwise not receive services or support. This collaboration benefited not only the professionals engaged, but the future students they will encounter. This unique project cultivated a strong collaborative relationship between an experienced pediatric nursing professor and a school counseling professor by engaging in training and the co-development of products that will advance the adoption of best practices in school health to reduce health and educational disparities.

Unanswered Questions and Limitations

A limitation of this pilot program includes lack of quantitative data to determine effectiveness of this cross-discipline collaboration. While informal data was collected, when providing this cross-discipline collaboration in the future, it is vital to collect both qualitative and quantitative data to ensure that the goals of the course are being met.

One of the difficulties of engaging in this cross-professional training included differences in training modalities. Within this university, nursing students enrolled in the pediatric adversity course did not all align their professional goals with school nursing, thus creating a gap with the school counseling course, where all students indicated a history of and desire to work within the school system. Additionally, nursing curriculum is provided in an online, asynchronistic format, creating difficulties in establishing relationships and engagement between the two classes. To address this gap in the learning environment, the authors and professors identified several dates wherein students could meet virtually and synchronically to engage in experiential learning activities, discussion, and didactic training.

An additional difficulty in cross-discipline collaborative training for many include the limited number of universities hosting both specializations (school counseling and nursing). We are employed at a large research one university that hosts a nursing program, as well as a counselor education program, enabling such cross-discipline collaboration. This may not be the case for many counselor education programs. While the opportunity may not exist to integrate programs and courses across professions within a single university, we identified a significant need within this training and encouraged flexibility and creativity to access cross-discipline collaboration. While many universities may not host those two programs, many community colleges offer nursing programs which could allow for collaboration. Identifying community members or individuals at other training programs may allow for guest lecturers and collaboration outside of the traditional university setting. We suggest collaborating with current school nurses and or training programs outside their respected universities to allow for this cross-discipline training. Counselor educators can also share with students the role of school nurses within their curricula and discuss ways in which partnership and collaboration can occur within schools. This exploration can occur while students are actively engaged in the school system, as with practicum and internships.

Future Directions for Practice and Research

Children are experiencing increasingly high levels of adversity (Bitsko, et al., 2018) and often lack access to care outside of the school setting (Green et al., 2018). The deleterious physical and mental health impacts of adversity into adulthood as well as on children's academic, career,

and personal/social development necessitates professional collaboration. Adversity, including the COVID-19 pandemic, may impact both physical and mental health of children, and thus requires multi-faceted interventions to address this need (Duan et al., 2020; Panchal, et al., 2020; Swick & Powers, 2018). Collaboration between school nurses and school counselors can better meet the needs of students within the school system and enhance identification of students who could benefit from physical and mental health support. Future research can assess the benefits of cross-discipline collaboration within the school system and the potential impacts on students' academic, career, and personal/social development. Exploring the ways in which cross-discipline collaboration impact's student development, both in the immediate and longitudinal spaces, provides necessary data to promote the continued collaboration between medical and mental health professionals to provide holistic support.

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