

A structured conceptualization of implementation-sensitive interventions for school mental health



Highlights

- Evidence-based, implementation-sensitive approaches is a concept that arose as a practice term within SMH-ON to describe approaches that fall at the intersection of having a foundation of evidence and being flexible and responsive to different contexts and feasible to implement
- Group concept mapping is a mixed-methods, stakeholder-driven approach that includes six steps and integrates qualitative data collected from key stakeholder groups and quantitative analytical techniques to create a map of related concepts.

What is this research about?

In Canada, the access to mental health services remains low while students experience high levels of mental health challenges. This is why there is widespread interest in expanding the roles of schools in responding to mental health concerns. An expanded vision of school mental health recognizes that schools are an ideal venue to provide mental health interventions given the amount of time students spend there and the presence of adults who see the students daily and can notice changes.

School Mental Health Ontario (SMH-ON) was developed as an intermediary organization to use implementation science to enhance the quality, consistency, scalability, and sustainability of school mental health practices across Ontario. SMH-ON conceptualized the idea of evidence-based, implementation-sensitive approaches to reflect an understanding that schools are complex and ever-changing systems and that a level of practicality is required to produce the intended student outcomes. However, the lack of clarity around the concept limits the awareness and impact of the approach beyond Ontario.

This study explores the use of group concept mapping (GCM) to capture characteristics of evidence-based, implementation-sensitive approaches to school mental health.

What did the researchers do?

For this study, researchers used standard group concept mapping procedures, which start with generating a list of statements on a particular topic. They began by obtaining the initial GCM statements from a group of 19 attendees at a research summit focused on evidence-based implementation-sensitive school mental health. Specifically, participants were asked to share characteristics of evidence-based, implementation-sensitive approaches to school mental health.

An additional 19 practitioners from SMH-ON were invited to the next step. All together, twenty-two participants completed both the sorting and rating activity. Sorting requires participants to make groups out of statements that they think go together. Next, they are asked to rate individual items in terms of importance. Participants' sorting results are averaged out to generate a cluster map that shows how statements tended to be group together. Lastly, 15 of the participants involved in the sorting and rating activities also participated in one of two 60-minute online focus groups to provide feedback and context about the concept map that had been generated.

Main findings

The researchers identified a six-cluster model that includes concepts for successful uptake of any school-based initiative: (1) justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI), (2) implementation informed from the outset, (3) intervention characteristics (4) evidence, theory, and practice informed, (5) authentic stakeholder engagement, and (6) ongoing learning and sustainability.

The group GCM activity helped to make these elements explicit. The current conceptualization also allowed researchers to recognize how the field is evolving and the importance of incorporating other types of expertise through the engagement of various stakeholders.

“It’s really about checking in with the people who are going to be participating at all stages of development...you’re seeking that input. So, no matter what part of the process you are at, whether it’s setting the environment with the leadership that’s going to endorse it, whether it’s getting feedback on co-design to begin with or whether or not it’s meeting the needs after you’ve delivered it...it kind of talks about the whole continuous process and getting input throughout.”

Overall, the results emphasized the importance of centring the foundation of the work being done around justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion from the outset. Another important area identified in the focus groups was Indigenous ways of knowing, which should be considered in the future conceptualization of evidence-based, implementation-sensitive approaches to school mental health.

“There are mental health interventions or ways of practicing that aren’t necessarily rigorously supported through evidence, such as Indigenous ways of wellness, that need to be incorporated and considered, but haven’t yet perhaps been rigorously examined and reviewed and repeated, but somehow [they] do have an impact. And so, we are often limited in our scientific approach to not using these things.”

Implications for evidence-based, implementation-sensitive approaches to school mental health

The results of this study help articulate the concept of evidence-based, implementation-sensitive approaches to school mental health while recognizing that it is an evolving area and further investigation is needed to see if it resonates with a broader audience. Although JEDI emerged as a distinct cluster, participants noted that it is actually a lens through which other work must be approached.

About this snapshot

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