

Evidence-Based, Implementation-Sensitive Approaches to School Mental Health: Introduction to the Special Issue

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Research about effective mental health services for young people have evolved from questions of “do they work” and “what works” to “*how* do they work?” Researchers are beginning to articulate the mechanisms of action in mental health interventions which allows those in the field to ask, *under what conditions* and *for whom* do these mechanisms lead to desirable change. This is an exciting era in mental health research because it allows us to identify principles for adapting evidence-based interventions to different practice and implementation contexts. Evidence-based, implementation-sensitive approaches attempt to preserve the mechanisms of action from evidence-based interventions while adapting their delivery to maximize their effect or sustainability within specific contexts or populations. This flexibility is particularly important for implementation in schools, where there are many constraints to implementing rigid protocols. Further, the diversity of students and communities requires schools to be able to adapt approaches to meet the needs of their communities.

School Mental Health Ontario (SMH-ON) is an intermediary organization that supports the implementation of effective school mental health practices in every school board in Ontario. Since 2013, it has emerged as an international leader in providing an intentional, scaffolded approach to school mental health. Over the course of this work, the leaders at SMH-ON realized that many existing evidence-based programs were

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either too costly, too rigid, or too long to be implemented feasibly in the Canadian context, and proposed the concept of evidence-based, implementation-sensitive approaches as a bridge between effective and feasible. The purpose of this special issue is to explore implementation-sensitive approaches to school mental health. Many of the articles included in the issue pertain to SMH-ON approaches and projects, while others describe innovative implementation-sensitive work being undertaken outside of that organization.

This special issue presents 10 articles that explore the concept of evidence-based, implementation-sensitive approaches to school mental health. Some of the articles provide examples of evidence-based, implementation-sensitive approaches while others discuss the theory and methodology of evidence-based, implementation-sensitive approaches to school mental health. By presenting a range of articles utilizing or describing evidence-based implementation-sensitive school mental health approaches, we hope to advance the field by encouraging research and practice to describe and investigate mechanisms in context.

Articles in the Special Issue

The first two articles set the stage for the special issue by describing the SMH-ON model and exploring evidence-based implementation-sensitive approaches as a concept. In *Using Implementation Science to Optimize School Mental Health During the Covid-19 Pandemic*, Short and colleagues describe foundational elements that contributed to rapid mobilization of school mental health service provision in Ontario schools as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The authors focus on the infrastructure strategy, implementation approaches, and evidence systems used to provide evidence-based implementation-sensitive mental health services across Ontario. Next, in *A Structured Conceptualization of Implementation-Sensitive Interventions for School Mental Health*, Crooks and colleagues use concept-mapping and focus-group methodologies to investigate the characteristics that lead to implementation-sensitive mental health services in educational settings. A range of experts in school mental health and implementation science participated in both concept mapping and focus groups to further our understanding of implementation-sensitive approaches.

The next five articles focus on Tier 1 interventions and some of the adaptation and implementation considerations related to these. Three of these articles stem from SMH-ON projects that were undertaken in partnership with a number of research teams around Ontario. In *Mechanisms Supporting Students' Social and Emotional Learning Development: Qualitative Findings from a Teacher-Led Intervention*, Peddigrew and colleagues use a qualitative methodology to investigate teacher perceptions of the mechanisms for how Social Emotional Learning programs can best translate into gains for students. They identified five key themes related to effective SEL programming: (1) a whole-class approach; (2) promoting a new vocabulary and shared language; (3) implementation of short, easy, reliable practices; (4) emphasis on transferable SEL strategies; and (5) improvements in teachers' SEL knowledge, confidence, and behaviour. Next, in *Focusing on Uptake: The Evolution of an Evidence-Informed Classroom Resource for Student Mental Health*, Mák and colleagues describe an iterative process of creating, evaluating, and revising an evidence-informed resource over several years. They highlight how data were used to increase the feasibility and uptake of the resource while maintaining the evidence-informed components. Linden and colleagues describe the preliminary evaluation of a mental health resource for teacher in, *Evaluation of "Bell Let's Talk in the Classroom": A Guide for Improving Teachers' Confidence in Providing Mental Health Education*. Universal instruction about mental health and help seeking is a powerful Tier 1 prevention strategy; however, many teachers are worried about

providing that instruction. This study uses a mixed methods evaluation to explore an intervention designed to increase teacher confidence in mental health instruction. Results indicate that the intervention was beneficial for increasing teacher confidence and decreasing worry.

The other two Tier 1 papers draw on projects external to SMH-ON. In *Partnering to Support a Mindfulness-Informed Social and Emotional Learning Program in Elementary Schools: Strategies Aligned with the Quality Implementation Framework*, Delaney and colleagues apply the Quality Implementation Framework to describe implementation strategies that lead to the successful deployment and evaluation of a mindfulness-based Social Emotional Learning curriculum over a six-year university-school board partnership. Notably, they describe how intentional pre-implementation and implementation strategies set the stage for sustainment of the initiative. Bowen and colleagues describe the development of a partnership model in Québec to address the need for coordinated action towards implementing evidence-based approaches in *Vers un partenariat pour la création de milieux scolaires favorisant, durablement et de façon efficiente, la socialization et le bien-être psychologique des élèves et du personnel*. Their approach includes partnering with practitioners and researchers on a coaching and training model to address sustainment from the outset of implementation efforts.

Finally, three articles address Tier 2 approaches. In *Implementing a Brief Evidence-Based Tier 2 School Mental Health Intervention: The Enablers and Barriers as Seen through a Clinical Team Supervisor Lens*, Crooks and colleagues undertook interviews with clinical supervisors from 12 boards to explore the utility of an implementation supported approach with a brief, structured psychotherapy program. In this study, clinical supervisors identified important characteristics about the intervention, individual clinician characteristics, implementation process, and inner and outer setting factors that functioned as levers to enable successful implementation. Next, Cwinn and colleagues explore the promise of Brief Digital Interventions (BDI), a novel treatment model that combines internet-delivered therapy, single session interventions, and progress monitoring. In *Brief Digital Interventions: An Implementation-Sensitive Approach to Addressing School Mental Health Needs of Youth with Mild and Emerging Mental Health Difficulties*, they discuss the evidence base for each modality and how they can complement each other. This paper also describes a pilot investigation of a BDI based on internet-delivered cognitive behaviour therapy in schools.

In *School-Based Suicide Prevention Through Gatekeeper Training: The Role of Natural Leaders*, Exner-Cortens and colleagues used a mixed methods design to evaluate a novel gatekeeper training supplement designed to increase effectiveness and promote program sustainment. Gatekeeper training is a frequently endorsed suicide prevention approach, but empirical reviews suggest that it is often insufficient to prevent suicidal behaviour. This study explores added implementation supports to enhance the effectiveness of the approach.

We wish to thank the team at the *Canadian Journal of Community Mental Health*, notably Dr. John Higenbottam, Ms. Nhi Vu, Ms. Anne Holley-Hime, and Ms. Katherine Stewart for their commitment to this special issue. They were supportive and responsive throughout the process. We would also like to acknowledge the reviewers who contributed quick and high-quality reviews to ensure the special issue proceeded in a timely manner: Drs. Deb Chiodo, Deinera Exner-Cortens, Alexandra Fortier, Sharon Hoover, Aaron Lyon, Debra Pepler, Kim Schonert-Reichl, Susan Rodger, and Maisha Syeda. We hope that this special issue identifies some of the challenges and opportunities for developing and evaluating school mental health approaches

that are both evidence-informed and sensitive to context, as more innovation and research is acutely needed in this field, particularly within a Canadian context.