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ABSTRACT

Title: Integrating Oral Health into Comprehensive School Health: A Multi-Interest Holder, Behavioural Health Perspective

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Background: Oral health is critical to overall health, yet isolated from school health programs. Fragmented evidence and limited understanding of interest holder perspectives continue to constrain effective integration.

Objectives: To identify behavioural and system-level factors influencing oral health integration in school health programs, through evidence synthesis and interest holder perspectives.

Methods: In phase 1, a scoping review mapped global school health programs using Arksey and O'Malley's framework (2005). Semi-structured group and individual interviews were conducted with school health promotion professionals (HPP) and school staff from three Edmonton elementary schools (principals, teachers, support staff) in phase 2, and with parents and children in phase 3. Data were collected in-person and virtually, audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed using content and thematic analysis.

Results: The scoping review resulted in 31 evidence sources, revealing the limited use of behavioural theory and inconsistent integration of oral health within school health programs. This was complemented by HPP (n=18) and school staff (n=39) viewing such integration conceptually valuable, but operationally challenging. Parents (n=37) emphasized the role of schools in reinforcing oral health habits alongside home routines, highlighting environmental cues and shared responsibility. Children (n=16) identified toothbrushing and flossing as good hygiene practices and classified sugary foods as harmful, linking these behavioural risk factors to health outcomes that were shared with them.

Conclusion: Integrating oral health in schools is more than an educational challenge, requiring behaviourally informed, multi-level strategies.

Institutional Ethics Approval: This research was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta (Study ID: Pro00131601 and Pro00142810).

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