

Research Article

Parents' perception of the school nurse's role

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Abstract

Background: School nurses possess an essential role in treating and helping children maintain health. However, the full scope of their role has not been identified by parents. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore parents' perceptions of the role of the school nurse.

Methods: Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data. One hundred eighty parents participated in the study. The perception of the roles of school nurses was assessed by a 16-item questionnaire, which was adapted from a study by Kirchofer, et al. 2007.

Results: The four most important school nurses' roles perceived by the parents were providing first aid and emergency care to children, communicating with parents and health care providers in the presence of a problem, providing medical treatment, and preventing and controlling diseases.

Conclusion: School nurses have many important roles, and while parents identified some essential roles, they did not recognize other vital roles as being very important. Increasing awareness of school nurses' multifaceted roles among parents is essential so that they can utilize nurses' expertise in maintaining their student's health as well as tap into a key resource in the coordination of care for their child.

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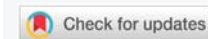
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Background

School nurses play a vital role in the school system. As a student's health can affect their ability to learn, the school nurse can support the learning process through assessment and management of the student's physical, emotional, and social health needs [1]. School nurses have many roles. They provide preventive care, emergency treatments of minor injuries, make referrals, and are integral members of the healthcare team in chronic illness management. The school nurse develops and implements health plans, monitors and implements immunizations services, maintains a healthy and safe environment for students, and serves as coordinator and interdisciplinary liaison [2]. Additionally, they work with the health department in tracking illness and infectious diseases as well as providing education to teachers and school staff. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and the Council on School Health, school nurses promote health and a safe environment by providing education, interventions for acute and chronic illnesses, public health activities, and case management services to promote self-management and advocacy and decrease health-related barriers that affect student learning [3].

Comprehension of the school nurse's role is essential to coordinated care. However, the role of the school nurse is poorly understood. Limited research exists on current understanding of the school nurse role. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore parents' perceptions of school nurses' role in the public school setting. The findings of this study will give insight into the perceptions held by parents. It is anticipated that by ascertaining this information, the school nurse role can be clearly defined and disseminated to the public/parents. Understanding beliefs regarding the role of the school nurse will offer opportunities to educate parents and school personnel on the importance of school nurses and the multifaceted responsibilities they hold. An awareness of school nurses' roles may help parents feel confident in the care their child receives while at school, and they may seek assistance from them.

Literature review

In the past, studies have examined the role of school nurses and parents' perceptions of school nurses' role but recently there is limited number of studies done in this area, especially in the United States. Studies have reported that majority of parents believe that the primary roles of the school nurse



are providing first aid, emergency care, giving medications, and checking students' health annually [4-6]. Other roles perceived as extremely important by parents are prevention of infectious disease and education of students on health issues [6]. Parents also highlighted the nurses' role in crisis response, screenings, immunizations, and health teaching [5].

Research questions

1. What are the parents' perceptions of the roles of the school nurse?
2. Is there a relationship between parents' perceptions of the roles of the school nurse and the demographic variables?

Design and sample

A convenience sample of 180 parents participated in this descriptive design study.

The population included all parents of students in grades K-12 in the South Plainfield Public School District, New Jersey and all parents of students in grades K-8 in the Warren Township Public School District, New Jersey. The inclusion criteria were parents of children attending K-12 grades in the participating school, parents who spoke and read English and Spanish, and parents who were willing to participate in the study. Out of a total of 196 questionnaires collected, 16 were discarded because of incomplete data information.

Instruments

Parents were invited to complete two questionnaires: demographic and their perceptions of school nurses' roles. The first questionnaire was used for collecting demographic information such as age, ethnic background, educational level, job status, health insurance etc. The second questionnaire assesses parents' perceptions of school nurses' role. A perception of school nurses' role questionnaire was adapted from Kirchofer, et al. [7] study. It consists of 17 items, where each item is rated as not important (0), important (1) and very important (2). The participants were asked to check one best answer for each question. The face and content validity of this questionnaire was tested, and the reliability was reported to be .77 [7]. Questionnaires were available in English and Spanish. The original questionnaire was in English and it was translated to Spanish and back to English by an in-house staff member, who is fluent in both Spanish and English.

Procedure

Permission was obtained from the researchers' Institutional Review Board and the targeted schools prior to data collection. Parents were invited to participate, voluntarily, via a message conveyed to them electronically by the school principals. Those who agreed to participate in the study and signed the consent form completed the questionnaire. The consent form and questionnaire were available in English

and Spanish. The participants completed either a Qualtrics web-based questionnaire or a paper questionnaire. Paper questionnaires were sent home with students and returned to the student's teacher. Completed paper questionnaires were placed in an envelope in the school office for pick up by the study investigators.

Data analysis

SPSS version 21.0 was used to analyze the data. Demographic information and parents' perceptions of school nurse roles were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Correlation coefficients were calculated to examine the relationships between parents' perceptions of nurse roles with the demographic variables.

Results

The questionnaire was mainly completed by mothers (73.8%), followed by fathers (8.1%), and others (3.8%). Demographic information is presented in table 1. The majority of parents were married (74.8%). Parents' report of number of children attending school ranged from 1 to 7 children; many reported two children (46.7%) followed by one child (25.6%) and three children (20.6%). Ninety-seven percent of the children had a primary health care provider. They had either private insurance (91.1%) or Medicaid (7.2%). Only one parent reported having no insurance. Only 14.4% of children were reported to have a chronic illness. The majority of parents (86%) reported talking/meeting with the school nurse. Eighty percent of children are reported as seeing a school nurse for a problem. The majority of them saw the nurse at least once a month or twice a month.

The total parents' perceptions of school nurses' role ranged from 8 to 32 with the mean score 24.44 (SD = 6.22). The frequency and percentage of parents' responses on school nurses' role is reported in table 2. The four most important school nurses' roles perceived by the parents were providing first aid and emergency care to children (96.7%), communicating with parents and health care providers in the presence of a problem (89.4%), providing medical treatment (83.9%), and preventing and controlling diseases (79.4%). The four least important roles perceived by the parents were conducting follow-up on referrals (36.7%), providing referrals (41.5%), follow-ups on students who miss school (43.3%), and administering over the counter medications (47.2%).

The total score on parents' perception of school nurses' role was associated with met/talked with school nurses ($r = .167, p = .05$). There was no other correlation between parents' perception and any other demographic variables.

Human subjects protection

All information obtained from the subjects was coded to ensure confidentiality of the data. Using code numbers and coded forms for all data collection materials minimizes the



Table 1: Frequency and percentage of demographic characteristics (N=180).

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Marital status of parents		
Married	157	74.8
Divorced/Separated	12	5.7
Widow	4	1.9
Other	7	3.3
Ethnicity		
White	139	77.2
Hispanic	17	9.4
Asian	16	8.9
African-American	5	2.8
Other	3	1.7
Fathers' education		
Less than high school	6	3.3
High school graduate	39	21.7
College	25	13.9
College graduate	110	61.1
Mothers' education		
Less than high school	2	1.1
High school graduate	17	9.5
College	20	11.1
College graduate	141	78.3
Fathers' job		
Full-time	165	91.7
Part-time	2	1.1
No job	9	5
No response	4	2.2
Mothers' job		
Full-time	114	63.3
Part-time	34	18.9
No job	32	17.8
Does school have a school nurse?		
Yes	178	98.8
No	1	0.6
Don't know	1	0.6
School nurse job		
Full-time	160	88.9
Part-time	2	1.1
Don't know	18	10
Child seen a school nurse for a problem?		
Yes	144	80
No	23	12.8
Don't know	9	5
No response	4	2.2

risk of violating confidentiality. These coded responses are protected in a secured locked file in the office of the principal investigator. No identifying data, such as names and addresses of participants, was collected. Furthermore, the data will only be presented as grouped data in publication and presentation of this research.

Discussion

Nursing implications

School nurses are essential members of the school team and are integral in managing and maintaining students' health. In order for excellent care to be provided, it is imperative that parents understand the role of school nurses and maintain open communication with them. It is an encouraging finding that parents were relatively knowledgeable about the school nurses' roles and the majority of parents communicated with school nurses. Their awareness of school nurses' roles could be due to the fact that most of the parents had college degrees and had access to the information. Additionally, parents may recognize the value in collaborating with school nurses in management of their child's care.

The first most important school nurses' role perceived as very important by the parents was providing emergency care to the children which was consistent with previous findings [4-6]. This is also consistent with an earlier study by Gross, et al. [8], which indicated that providing first aid was the most important role of the school nurse; the authors noted that parents also deemed evaluating hygiene in the school a very important responsibility. A third study also found similar findings where parents specified that school nurses respond to crises [5]. The next most important role perceived was communicating with parents and health care providers in the presence of a problem. This finding is supported by that fact that 86% of parents reported talking/meeting with the school nurse and the total score on parents' perception of school nurses' role was found to be associated with met/talked

Table 2: Frequencies and percentages of parents' responses on school nurses' roles (N = 180).

Questions on Nurses' Roles	Very important	Important	Not important
Provides first aid and emergency care to students.	174 (96.7)	4 (2.2)	2 (1.1)
Communicates with parents, school and health providers if health problem exist.	161 (89.4)	18 (10.0)	1 (0.6)
Prevents and controls diseases and creates a positive school environment by monitoring immunization, monitoring environmental safety, etc.	143 (79.4)	31 (17.2)	6 (3.3)
Educates teachers on the health requirements for students.	142 (67.8)	42(23.3)	16 (8.9)
Provides medical treatments to students.	151 (83.9)	28 (15.6)	1 (0.6)
Teaches students about health issues.	106 (58.9)	64 (35.6)	10 (5.6)
Works with school team on health, safety and educational issues.	119 (66.1)	55 (30.6)	6 (3.3)
Performs health screening (vision, hearing, dental etc.).	92 (51.1)	50 (27.8)	38 (21.1)
Maintains student health record (immunizations, screenings, etc.).	143 (68.3)	42 (23.3)	15 (8.3)
Provides health education and services to the school staff.	95 (52.8)	76 (42.2)	9 (5.0)
Identifies health problems.	121 (67.2)	53 (29.4)	6 (3.3)
Gives prescription medication.	105 (58.3)	48 (26.7)	27 (15.0)
Follow-ups on students who miss school.	78 (43.3)	67 (37.2)	35 (19.4)
Gives over the counter medications.	85 (47.2)	66 (36.7)	29 (16.1)
Provides referrals to local agencies and services.	74 (41.5)	63 (35.0)	43 (23.9)
Conducts follow-up on referrals to local agencies and services.	66 (36.7)	63 (35.0)	51 (28.3)



with school nurses. While other studies did not indicate that parents placed high value on communication with the school nurse, Maughan & Adams [5] noted that parent perceptions were dependent upon the quality of interactions between parents and school nurses, and that parents indicated they only learned the various roles of school nurses by observing them directly during volunteer activities.

There was no correlation between the parents' perceptions of school nurses' roles and the demographic variables except one. The total score on parents' perception of school nurses' role was only associated with met/talked with school nurses. This finding was supported by that fact that more than three quarters of the parents reported talking/meeting with the school nurse in one of the demographic questions (Have you ever met or talked with your child's school nurse?).

Although this study indicates that parents were relatively aware of the school nurses' roles, they did not perceive some of the roles as very important. Roles that were not perceived as important by the parents include conducting follow-up on referrals, providing referrals, and follow-ups on students who miss school. These roles are equally important because by providing referrals and follow up, school nurses can effectively increase medical care coordination and hence support students' health. According to the National Association of School Nurses [1], the school nurse coordinates student health care between the medical home, family, and school. Numerous coordination efforts take place on a daily basis to ensure that a student's healthcare needs are being managed effectively during the school day and beyond. Educating teachers and other school team members is an essential component of this coordination of care, another role not recognized by parents.

School nurses are vital to the health and safety of students. Therefore, the multiple responsibilities that school nurses carry out should be highlighted and disseminated to parents and the public. As school nurses are partners with families in the care of their students, it is imperative that parents realize the multifaceted roles that school nurses possess. Without recognizing the various areas that school nurses are involved in, parents may be missing out on a valuable resource that is available to their children and family. School nurses, in conjunction with their principals, should make parents aware of all functions of the school nurse, how to access their services, the importance of informing the school nurse of any concerns or health issues parents and students may have, and the value of ongoing communication with the school nurse.

Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that parents recognize roles of providing first aid and medical treatments,

communication with parents, and disease prevention as highly important. However, follow-up with regard to missed school days and referrals, making provider referrals, and medication administration were viewed as less important. As the nurse plays an important role in coordination of care with providers and other members of the healthcare team, it is imperative that parents understand this essential component of a school nurse's responsibilities. The school nurses in collaboration with the school principal could set up an educational session or a meeting each year for parents to explain about the school nurses' roles and how they can help children and parents. During this session, nurses could also explore if parents have any specific needs or questions. Based on the need assessment, nurses could develop educational sessions for children and/or parents.

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