



School Nurses' Experiences and Perceptions of Healthy Eating School Environments



Jean Muckian, Ph.D., RN^{a,*}, Julia Snethen, Ph.D., RN^b, Aaron Buseh, Ph.D., MPH, MSN^b

^a University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 6326 Piping Rock Road, Madison, WI 53711, United States

^b University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, College of Nursing, PO Box 413, Milwaukee, WI 53201-0413, United States

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ABSTRACT

School nurses provide health promotion and health services within schools, as healthy children have a greater potential for optimal learning. One of the school nurses' role is in encouraging healthy eating and increasing the availability of fruits and vegetables in the school. The purpose of this study was to explore and describe school nurses' perceptions of their role in promoting increased fruit and vegetable consumption in the school setting. One avenue to increased availability of fruits and vegetables in schools is Farm to School programs mandated by the Federal government to improve the health of school children. School nurses are optimally positioned to work with Farm to School programs to promote healthy eating. A secondary aim was to explore school nurses' knowledge, experiences and/or perceptions of the Farm to School program to promote fruit and vegetable consumption in the school setting. Three themes emerged from the focus groups: If There Were More of Me, I Could Do More; Food Environment in Schools; School Nurses Promote Health. School nurses reported that they addressed health issues more broadly in their roles as educator, collaborator, advocate and modeling healthy behaviors. Most of the participants knew of Farm to School programs, but only two school nurses worked in schools that participated in the program. Consequently, the participants reported having little or no experiences with the Farm to School programs.

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Environments

Excess weight among school children has been identified for several decades as a major health concern in the U. S. (Institute of Medicine, 2012). Unhealthy dietary patterns, including limited fruit and vegetable intake, and high intake of energy dense foods with low nutrient value, has been identified as contributing to excess weight among school aged children (Briefel, Crepinsek, Cabili, Wilson, & Gleason, 2009; Davis, Cullen, Watson, Konarik, & Radcliffe, 2009). The school setting is an ideal place for developing and implementing health promotion programs. As children spend a majority of their day within the school system, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA, 2012) has developed programs to provide resources aimed at educating children about excess weight and promoting good dietary health behaviors within the school setting (Ohri-Vachaspati, Turner, & Chaloupka, 2012; Turner & Chaloupka, 2012).

Although research exists on the promotion of fruits and vegetables within public schools and its benefits, information on the role of nurses

in the development and implementation of nutritional programs is sparse. Thus, it is important to understand the role of nurses in school-based health educational activities. According to the National Association of School Nurses (NASN, 2011) the school nurse role is described as: (a) a leader who supervises and participates in the creation of health policies and programs in the school; and (b) promotes health education. Additionally, school nurses collaborate within the school community to create a healthy and safe school environment for children (NASN, 2011), including promoting a healthy eating environment (NASN, 2015).

School nurses can play an important role in helping students lead healthy lifestyles including healthy eating and preventing overweight among school-aged children. According to the NASN (2015) school nurses are also tasked in assuring that school children are healthy in order to optimize their academic success. However, limited information was found in the literature specifically related to the school nurses' role in increasing fruit and vegetable consumption in the schools.

Increased access to fruits and vegetables in school lunches is one of the goals of the USDA (2012). One strategy that the USDA (2013) has implemented in order to increase fruit and vegetable consumption has been to sponsor the National Farm to School program. The Farm to School program provides grants to enable fresh fruits and vegetables from local farms to be brought in and used in the children's school

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: jmuckian@charter.net (J. Muckian), Julia@uwm.edu (J. Snethen), aaronbg@uwm.edu (A. Buseh).

lunches. Additionally, the Farm to School program provides grants for staff training, developing partnerships, and equipment for school gardens (National Farm to School Network, 2016). The program is available in all 50 states.

Data on the Farm to School program suggest that implementation of the program within the school increases students' knowledge and positive attitudes regarding eating fruits and vegetables (LaRowe, Yoder, Knitter, Meinen, Liebhart, & Schoeller, 2012). LaRowe et al. (2012) reported that after one year in the Farm to School program, students improved their knowledge and attitudes toward trying and/or liking fruits and vegetables, suggesting that Farm to School programs may impact children's food preferences. Similarly, Story, Nanney, and Schwartz (2009) reported on the positive effects of policies that improve the quality of food in the school environment. The researchers examined Farm to School programs, school gardens, as well as the federal fruit and vegetable program and found that all of these programs increased the availability of fruits and vegetables in the school environment.

No information was found in the research literature related to school nurses' experiences or perceived roles in increasing children's fruit and vegetable intake specifically through Farm to School programs. Given the role that the school nurse plays in health promotion within the school system, it would seem that school nurses are optimally positioned to promote or coordinate programs to increase the fruit and vegetable consumption in the school setting. However, some school nurses may feel that they don't have the capacity and resources to develop and implement health promotion programs; others may feel that it is not within their role (Chabot, Godin & Gagnon, 2010). Thus, the primary aim of this study was to explore and describe school nurses' perceptions of their role in promoting increased fruit and vegetable consumption in the school setting. A secondary aim was to explore school nurses' knowledge, experiences and/or perceptions of the Farm to School program to promote fruit and vegetable consumption in the school setting.

Methods

The researcher used qualitative focus group methodology in this study. All study materials were reviewed and approved by the authors' University Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to beginning this study. A purposive sample of school nurses from urban and rural areas of a midwestern state were recruited for participation in this investigation. Recruitment occurred through direct invitation at the state Association of School Nurses conference or by e-mails sent by the president of the state Association of School Nurses or the School Nursing and Health Services consultant from the state Department of Public Instruction. The criteria for inclusion in the study were: (a) school nurses who practiced in a public school in the state; (b) English speaking; and (c) willing to participate in the study. All participants had a minimum of a bachelor's degree in nursing (see Table 1).

Socio-demographic information was obtained using a brief survey that was completed by study participants. Demographic information included the highest level of education, years of working as a school nurse, etc. A semi-structured interview guide was developed based on the literature and was used for the focus group discussions. The principal investigator conducted five focus groups with three participants per focus group. Due to the geographic distance of the school nurses, focus groups were conducted on-line using Skype or via teleconferencing. Examples of questions asked during the focus group discussion were: What are your perceptions of your role in increasing children's fruit and vegetable consumption within school settings? What are your personal experiences regarding the Farm to School program within your school where you currently work?

The focus groups were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by the first author. The following steps were used in analyzing the data: (a) transcripts were read and coded individually by the first 2 authors who focused on the content transcribed from each focus group; (b) the authors then met to discuss and reconcile the nodes generated

Table 1
Demographic data.

Demographic data	n (%)
Education	
BSN	11 (73%)
BS	1 (7%)
MSN	2 (13%)
MS	1 (7%)
Enrolled in school nursing courses	7 (47%)
Number of years as an RN	
Less than 3 years	1 (7%)
7–10 years	1 (7%)
More than 10 years	13(87%)
Number of years as school nurse	
Less than 3 years	2 (13%)
3–6 years	2 (13%)
7 to 10 years	6 (40%)
More than 10 years	5 (33%)
Number of schools where school nurses practiced	
1–2 schools	10 (67%)
More than 4 schools	5 (33%)
Student enrollment in the schools where nurses practiced	
Less than 750 students	2 (13%)
750–999 students	8 (53%)
1000–1500	1 (7%)
More than 1500 students	4(27%)
Setting	
Rural	8 (53%)
Urban	7 (47%)
Fruit and vegetable program in schools	
Yes	8 (53%)
No	6 (40%)
Don't know	1 (7%)
Farm to School programs in schools	
Yes	4 (27%)
No	11 (73%)

from the initial coding; (c) the authors coded the transcripts a second time and met to discuss the nodes; (d) finally, the authors met to discuss and come to consensus on the labels for the themes and subthemes that emerged from the second coding. The authors stayed true to the purpose of the study and the quotes generated from the focus group discussions.

Findings

A total of five focus groups were conducted, with three participants per focus group, (see Table 1). Participants in the focus groups ($N = 15$) were registered nurses who held bachelor degrees (80%) or master degrees (20%). The majority of nurses (73%) worked seven or more years as a school nurse. A majority of the participants (53%) worked in rural school districts, with 67% working within one to two schools. One third of the nurses were responsible for four or more schools. Over half (53%) of the school nurses worked in school(s) that had between 750 and 999 students.

Three broad themes that emerged from the data were: (a) food environment in schools; (b) school nurses promote health; and (c) if there were more of me, I could do more. Each of the themes will be discussed in the Findings section. Subthemes that emerged from the themes "Food Environment In Schools" and "If There Were More Of Me, I Could Do More" will also be discussed.

Food Environment in Schools

The theme "Food environment in schools" consisted of four sub-themes: (a) input in regulating foods; (b) food choices: healthy, unhealthy, and unappealing; (c) foods: competitive revenue generator; and (d) unappealing foods are disgusting. In this theme, it was apparent that the school's eating environment is influenced through a variety of venues. Foods are brought into the school through the lunch program,

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