

# **EARLY IDENTIFICATION OF EMERGING CHILD MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS: EXPLANATIONS FOR SENCO'S DIFFERING PRACTICES IN MIXED POPULATION PRIMARY SCHOOLS.**

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## **Background:**

Schools and mental health systems frequently fail to accommodate to the needs of diverse populations. Consequently, care needs and care utilization continue to diverge, putting children who experience mental health problems (MHPs) at risk for more serious problems and more demanding care. Reducing this discrepancy would be possible by improving early problem identification and removing well-known barriers to care (De Anstiss et al., 2009). School-settings are considered suitable in both respects, succeeding in child developmental monitoring and bypassing several contextual and practical barriers (Doll et al., 2017). Endeavors of Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) particularly matter in this regard, as differing practices may affect whether child MHPs are noticed or overlooked.

## **Aims:**

The study gains insight into SENCOs differing practices in Dutch mixed population primary schools, regarding early identification of emerging MHPs. We examine how observational practices differ, and what factors explain these differences.

## **Methods:**

Document analysis, in-depth interviews and subsequent thematic analysis are used to investigate SENCOs' early identification practices in the context of a school-based mental health program.

## **Results:**

SENCO's early identification practices vary widely with regard to who observe, in what settings/situations, and when and how often observations take place. These variations can have major consequences for identification quality and timeliness. Varying practices result from SENCO's work in general, as well as from the interplay of multitudinous explaining factors on three levels (i.e., personal, team, school). In highly mixed population schools, it may take extra efforts to dedicate time and attention to observations that help to arrive at valid assessments, in which bias is countered.

## **Implications:**

To prevent over- and under-identification of MHPs and to meet the needs of children from diverse backgrounds, school teams should explicitly discuss early identification strategies and expectations regarding SENCO practices, to direct task prioritization and prevent reluctances to act.

## **Full List of Authors**

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## **Learning Objectives**

At the conclusion of this presentation, participants will be able to:

1. Identify (consequences of) differing observational practices (e.g. who, when, where) in primary schools.
2. Explain why special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) act differently when it comes to early identification in mixed population schools.