Reviewer's report

Title: The school environment and student health: a systematic review and meta-ethnography of qualitative research

Version: 2 Date: 2 April 2013

Reviewer: Judi Kidger

Reviewer's report:

This is a well written paper on a question that is increasingly being asked in policy and research – what is the impact of the school on student health? Key strengths are the paper’s use and development of relevant theory, and also the very clear description of the synthesis process. I’d like to see two main issues addressed 1) the justification for this paper in the light of other research needs to be made clearer and 2) justification/explanation for why only certain health topics were included, and consideration of how this may have affected the particular meta-themes that emerged.

Major Compulsory Revisions

Background

1. On page 4, could the authors give some examples of what they mean by ‘crude measures of the school environment’, and by ‘indirect evidence’? At the moment this whole paragraph, which critiques previous studies and forms the justification for this paper, is not really clear without going back to the referenced papers themselves.

2. A sentence on what qualitative research specifically brings to the comprehensive picture (e.g. its strengths in exploring context and process) is also needed here, by way of justifying the importance of this paper – this is done well in start of the discussion but should be briefly mentioned here.

Methods

3. Greater clarity is needed about the extraction process in the section on page 6. Were specific questions used for data extraction? E.g. was table 1 based on an extraction sheet? Or could an example be given of the data that were extracted?

4. Under step 2 page 7, why these particular health topics? Was this based on what the studies were mostly about? It is stated in the discussion that no conceptually rich studies have looked at physical activity or mental health – if this is the reason for the focus on these health topics this should be stated here. Otherwise it is not clear that the review has been comprehensive in terms of how health is being conceptualised.

Discussion

5. Under limitations, the authors should consider the way in which the particular health topics may also have led to certain themes emerging, while others
remained silent. The focus seemed biased towards risky health behaviour, rather than a wider conceptualisation of health, including for example consideration of mental health, or of positive health behaviours such as physical activity. These different issues may have led to consideration of how schools may enhance as well as endanger health. The claim that there were no conceptually rich studies that have focused on for example mental health is a bold one; there are examples in the literature of qualitative studies that have looked at the ways in which the school environment impacts on mental health and have produced themes that are similar to those included in the meta-analysis here. A fuller justification is needed for omitting such studies.

6. More detailed discussion on what could be done in schools is needed; after the detailed and careful analysis this concluding paragraph feels a bit vague – for example what sorts of interventions would address the spatial patterning of risk?

Supplement 1

7. The authors should include the actual search terms they used in the strategy

Minor Essential Revisions

8. In the Abstract, it would be useful to indicate what the actual search question was here as this is not clear without reading the paper. Relatedly, I suggest removing the reference to sense of identify and friendships from the second sentence as these are themes that emerged as relevant to health in the findings, they were not part of the initial search question.

9. The same applies to the sentence referring to identify and friendships on page 4 – it is not clear why identity and friendship are specifically being picked out – did the authors have an a priori theory that these would prove to be important components of the process by which the environment affects health? If so this needs to be stated in the introduction more clearly. If not, this sentence should be reworded.


11. Page 20, a line space is needed between references 15 and 16.

12. Page 7 behaviour is spelt in two different ways.

13. Table 1: It would be good to have a column indicating the health topic with which each paper was concerned.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests