DEVELOPING SYSTEMS INTERVENTIONS IN A SCHOOL SETTING: AN APPLICATION OF COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH FOR MENTAL HEALTH

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INTRODUCTION

This paper describes the development of a community-based participatory research (CBPR) project in mental health services research. The project’s objective was to generate a series of interventions in a public school system to improve the behavioral and academic functioning of students from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds. The project was developed in a participatory fashion with the special education office in a public school district and with personnel from two individual schools in an urban city. Data have consistently shown that some minorities are disproportionately represented in special education (SPED) and in special classrooms for emotional and behavioral disorders (SED). In 2001, African Americans represented 19.8% of the SPED population nationally but only 14.8% of the child population in the country. Latinos and Asians tend to be under-represented nationally with 14.5% and 1.9% of the SPED population, respectively, compared to 17.5% and 3.8% of the child population. Recent recommendations for addressing these disparities include more integrated general and SPED services and early intervention through a universal and multitiered intervention strategy that is based in general-education classrooms.

Schools are ideal settings to introduce changes that can help minority youth achieve academic competence, increase engagement and valuation, and decrease emotional distress. Previous literature has stressed the importance of schools for minority children to prevent academic failure and drop-out and emotional problems. In the refugee population, poor school performance has been associated with emotional problems as well. Students’ school failure and academic difficulties may be partly attributed to deficiencies in the teaching environment. Academic rigor and classroom management account for considerable variance in students’ achievement, even when controlling for family and socioeconomic disadvantage. For example, students with limited English proficiency may not succeed because they do not have access to effective instruction in English as a second language (ESL), to instruction that is sensitive to the cultural and social values of students’ context, or to specialized instruction that addresses specific learning disabilities.

This CBPR study was guided by the person-environment fit framework based upon work by Eccles et al who suggest that students may develop behavioral and conduct problems, when in fact the primary problem is that the school environment is not conducive to learning. Thus, students’ academic needs are inadequately addressed, and as a consequence, behavioral problems emerge. A number of interventions focused on the behavioral and academic needs of youth in a school setting have been successful. Some interventions...