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School-Based Family Counseling Evaluation: Warm Feelings, Perilous Paradigms & Empirical Hopes

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This paper provides an overview of a pilot evaluation of the implementation of the school-based family counseling (SBFC) model among urban schools in Los Angeles. We describe the themes derived from structured interviews that were conducted with principals at schools implementing the SBFC model. These themes were positive and endorse the anecdotal feedback that we have often received from administrators at implementation sites. Significant challenges were encountered in our initial attempts to collect evaluation data which informed our SBFC evaluation paradigm. We end the article describing our empirical hopes for more rigorous multi-method evaluations of the SBFC model.

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School-Based Family Counseling is not a new concept (Boyd-Franklin & Bry, 2000; Evans & Carter, 1997; Gerrard, 2008). Over the years, many gifted school counselors and family counselors have known that working with parents is critical to helping children succeed, and have attempted to incorporate parents into their work. Numerous previous models have incorporated the basic tenets of working with families at school sites to improve student performance (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Nicoll, 2002; Terry, 2002). These models have included full-service school concepts, family support centers at schools, family and group counseling, parent training, site-based mental health services, and prevention programming. These diverse efforts have focused on the full continuum from prevention activities to crisis intervention with the aim of supporting students in areas that lead to academic improvement (Walsh & Williams, 1997).

Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), among others, have focused on working systemically with parents and school personnel to overcome barriers to learning by providing mental health services at the school. These "school-

based" services also included family counseling, but were provided by traditional mental health professionals such as social workers and family therapists. Such services, while helpful to individual families and students, were often not formally linked to academic performance. Adelman and Taylor have documented this disconnect and believe that a major difficulty with the long-term effectiveness of these service-models is that they are not specifically aligned with the mission of the school: academic achievement (Adelman & Taylor, 2000). Consequently, the funding of these programs has not been a high priority for school personnel when making budgetary decisions, and many good programs have fallen by the wayside (Sandoval, 2002).

In 1990, a graduate program was developed at California State University, Los Angeles (CSULA) that trained students in an integrative model to become both school counselors and marriage and family therapists. A full explication of this SBFC training model has been previously published (Carter & Perluss, 2008). This integrated program developed counselors who had the skill sets of both professions and who could work at the school site supporting teachers, administrators, students and their families to increase academic success. This enabled the SBFC counselor to become part of the fabric of the school rather than being an outsider who provided periodic services. In addition, the role of counselor was expanded to include a range of prevention activities that could facilitate improved community-family-campus interactions and positive school climate. In essence, this role helps schools to respond to a variety of crises and to integrate community stakeholders into the process of solving issues that directly affect academic success (e.g. gang involvement, child welfare issues, school funding shortfalls, and other community challenges facing the school and surrounding neighborhoods). In 1997, Evans and Carter published an article detailing the multifaceted role of the School-Based Family Counselor and gave some examples of the practices involved in SBFC, including this facilitation function (Evans & Carter, 1997). Since then, efforts have been made to implement the more narrow scope of the SBFC model with students and graduates of the CSULA program in several urban public schools in Los Angeles.

These efforts led to the development of specific procedures to address the primary focus of SBFC, which is on family-related problems that affect a child's school behavior and academic achievement (Bryan, 2005; Carter & Evans, 1995; Englund, Luckner, Whaley, & Englund, 2004). These SBFC procedures focus on issues that affect school climate and inhibit student success. In essence, they comprise two main sets of strategies. The first set are *prevention* strategies that are conducted with large groups of students, parents, faculty and administrators to facilitate solutions to school, family, and community issues that most affect students' ability to succeed. These activities can range from providing parent education and staff development workshops to facilitating collaboration among community stakeholders, which address critical needs and barriers to learning. The second set comprises *postvention* activities that are offered for specific students and their families in order to address pre-existing problems. These include SBFC interviews and individual and family counseling sessions with families of students referred for emotional and behavioral issues, and inconsistent school attendance and performance. While implementing these pre- and postvention strategies, a number of school-system related problems were encountered that also had a considerable effect on student success. These problems included ineffective classroom behavior management, alienation of parents, conflicts among school staff and administrators, institutional racism, and ineffective communication. Subsequently, specific interventions were developed to address these problems (Carter & Evans, 2008).

Throughout this period, attempts were made to implement an evaluation plan that would measure the effectiveness of the SBFC model in addressing barriers to student learning. The usual pattern was to begin with a pilot year at a school that focused on learning about the school, implementing SBFC activities, and developing measurement tools. Then, in the second year, we would begin collecting data. Unfortunately, we consistently encountered significant obstacles beyond our control that interrupted our plan. These typically involved changes in school personnel, often at the administrative level, that affected established relationships and school agreements. This led to disruption in the ability to provide SBFC services related to several obstacles. These included a lack of designated office space to provide services (sometimes not even a broom closet to work with families), misunderstanding of the need to guarantee confidentiality (administrators and staff interrupting counseling sessions without regard to confidentiality; demanding to know the content of sessions, etc.), fear of liability associated with counseling families at school sites (although this did not seem to be a problem in counseling students in traditional individual and group settings where liability is essentially the same), unwillingness to address school-system issues that compromised student learning (ineffective behavior management by teachers and playground staff; institutional racism among administrators, faculty, staff, and students; overreactions after the need to report child abuse); and, at its most alarming, intimidation of Spanish-speaking immigrant parents to withdraw so that their children's test scores would not reduce the school's average.

In 2008, the Aspire Charter Public Schools (a non-profit company providing public education opportunities in urban areas of California) approached us with an offer to implement SBFC activities and evaluation on their Los Angeles campuses. After specific negotiations with the owners and top administrators at the state level, we began to work together. Their actions have been very straightforward and, despite several changes in personnel, they have been true to their commitments to date. Moreover, they have demonstrated considerable financial commitment to this process, despite the declining economy. We began by placing second year SBFC graduate students in four elementary schools (K-5th grades) and one middle school (6th-8th grades) within a small city in urban East Los Angeles. These schools' population was over 98% Latino with the majority of the parents being undocumented immigrants without citizenship.

Warm Feelings

At the end of the first year of implementation, video interviews were conducted with the principals of the four elementary schools and the middle school. They were asked eight open-ended questions about their experiences with the SBFCs at their school. These questions can be found in Table 1 and were designed to elicit principal perceptions about the SBFCs that had been placed in their schools. The interviews lasted between 20 to 30 minutes. Participants' responses were categorized according to themes by reading the transcripts, highlighting responses and then placing the responses under general domains. A content analysis was then conducted by searching through the transcription for references to the domains identified by the author. This process employed Glaser and Strauss' (1967) constant comparative method with an emphasis on the respondents' natural language. The constant comparative method is a form of grounded theory that allows for a more systematic formation of theory in qualitative research (Glaser, 1965). Their answers were organized into six major themes regarding the effectiveness of the SBFC in implementing both prevention and postvention activities with students, families, and faculty and staff (see Table 1).

SBFC interview questions for principals:

1. What has it meant for you to have an SBFC at your school?
2. What changes in students and parents have you seen as a result of having an SBFC work with them?
3. What changes have you seen in teachers as a result of working with the SBFC?
4. Has the SBFC been effective in addressing daily conflicts within the school involving parents, students or staff?
5. How has working with the SBFC affected your job as an administrator?
6. How does your experience with the SBFC differ from your experience with other school counselors or school psychologists?
7. How has the SBFC led to improvements in school climate?
8. Are there any changes you can think of that would improve the services provided by the SBFC?

Qualitative Themes

1. Facilitation of conflict resolution with students, staff and parents.
2. Improvement of communication throughout the school.
3. Providing expert information about social, emotional and developmental factors for students and families.
4. Promotion of positive school environment.
5. Addressing underlying social and emotional issues of discipline problems by involving parents in interventions at home and school.
6. Prevention of issues that create barriers to learning.

Table 1. Interviews with principals

All the themes derived from the interview transcripts with principals reflect their positive experiences with the SBFC, who is clearly meeting a need or filling a gap at these schools. It is interesting that more of the comments were about having a staff member on campus with the family counseling skill set to enhance school climate and reduce barriers to learning than the specific counseling strategies used with students and families. Most of the themes represent improving school-wide communication, resolving conflicts and promoting positive school climate to reduce barriers to learning:

I think the biggest impact is that there is no feeling in the staff that a child could not be emotionally successful, no child can be a failure. I think a lot of times teachers are overwhelmed with lots of kids and nobody is helping anybody, so I think that we have a very problem solving atmosphere here with the students.

She has really helped us with student-student conflict and parent-teacher conflicts. Mary ran a girls group that was more proactive than reactive. We knew that these girls could tend to develop negative behavior towards each other, so she started a group before the trouble started. Then, with teachers, when parents bring up a concern, she's able to filter it and go to the teacher and help them build that relationship with the parents so it actually helped everybody.

I've definitely seen a more positive outlook on school for some of our troubling kids... We have a number of students that just needed work in their conflict-resolution skills and I've seen them not be able to talk through some problems or talk about their feelings. I've seen them practice the strategies out in the yard, so I've seen changes in students' behavior and there's been a decrease in behavior office referrals.

I think the SBFC plays a big part when you walk into the school, you do feel the sense of calmness, a sense of purposefulness, a sense of happiness. I think that quality instruction is really important, but if the students don't want to be here and don't feel successful, then that instruction is going to go nowhere, so I think it all ties in.

Another theme was improvement of discipline procedures by addressing the social and emotional issues underlying behavior and involvement of parents in home and school interventions:

I think a lot of the things that students are experiencing are due to home life and parent life, and I think a lot of it is teaching parents what is appropriate and what kind of things influence their child. So, Mary working with the parents without the kids sets them up for success because Mary's working behind the scenes and that's impacting students without students really knowing, teaching the parents so the kids don't have to feel like "I'm always being pulled from class for counseling".

Ana deals primarily with discipline and the SBFC guides her in terms of talking to the kids and trying to find out what emotional or social issues are going on which are causing the discipline issues and then, if they turn out to be serious, then the SBFC takes over. He counsels with the students, but he also has done a great deal of work with our parents... So he's been as huge asset to our school.

In addition, principals talked about the SBFC's ability to provide expert information about social, emotional and developmental factors for students and families:

I think the behavior modifications that she's helped put in place for repeat offenders. The second would be the parent piece, the parent education, the parent support. And the third for me as principal, is to have somebody that I can talk to and sort of help counsel me and the calls we need to make, it's been really helpful. We've had a couple of situations that have been really difficult and thank goodness Louisa happened to be here in that situation.

I think that she's able to be that expert in a field where I'm not an expert. Having Mary as an expert allows the staff to go to her and really ask questions I might not be qualified to answer, so that's really helped us. When parents and teachers bring up an issue about student behavior that's not normal student behavior, we are able to go and ask her, "What do you think about this?" "Why do you think it's happening?" Or "Can you touch base with this family, so that it's in a nonthreatening kind of manner?"

Finally, principals talked of the SBFC's role in the prevention of issues that create barriers to learning:

She's definitely played a role in the preventative aspects of dealing with behavior. We've tried in the past to deal with behavioral issues in a reactive way and now we've tried to be proactive and make sure that kids are learning from their behavior. But it's hard to always get to that step without the support staff there that can really help teach the kids. It's nice to have her on campus because then we can say to the students and families, "We want to learn from this and we've got somebody that's going to help."

My lead team and I weren't seeing eye-to-eye. Sam offered to do mediation, but even before we started the mediation, Sam gave us a talk about how we were raised in different cultures and how that can contribute greatly to the way we communicate with other people. He wanted us to gain that understanding because it would better help us understand each other. He was right; we all felt much more comfortable and were able to trust each other because he had given us insight in the differences in our communication methods.

Perilous Paradigms

These comments reflect the many warm feelings that these administrators have about the work that the SBFCs have done, especially in facilitating areas of conflict and concern among students, parents and school staff. However, qualitative data alone will not bring about second order systemic change in the type of support services that are provided in schools. Clearly, what is needed is more objective evidence regarding the efficacy of SBFC services. Accordingly, we began a pilot evaluation to collect quantitative data on the *prevention* components of the SBFC role through surveys of parents before and after parent training workshops. We also began to collect comparison group data on postvention activities, with some students receiving family counseling from an SBFC, while other students received traditional school counseling until SBFC services were available. This design is a common waitlist comparison group evaluation that we hoped would provide evidence of the effect of the SBFC program model. Data collection on these *postvention* components involved pre and post parent assessments (before and after family counseling interventions) on their child's emotions and behavior in the home, as well as the child's engagement in high risk behavior (substance use and negative peer relationships). These surveys were validated self-report measures from current educational research in Nevada and other Western states on high-risk children and their families. In light of the fact that almost all of the families in our study were Latino, we examined the work of Shrout, et.al. (2008) about the need to develop measures that attain cultural relevance with Latinos and Asians – including semantic, content and technical equivalency, and internal consistency of the measures across languages and Latino sub-ethnic groups. We modified our scales accordingly. In addition, existing school data such as the students' grades, attendance, test scores, and frequency of discipline referrals was gathered for the students of these families. This school data as well as parent feedback to counselors and administrators revealed improvement in student behavior and achievement.

Unfortunately, the t-test analyses from the pilot pre-post data were non-significant, with scores actually declining on pro-social and positive school-related behaviors. The discrepancy between this survey data and the positive objective and anecdotal data (existing school data and parent feedback) was surprising. Accordingly, informal focus groups were conducted with parents regarding their perceptions of completing the survey instruments. What we found was that, despite our attempts to modify and develop rating scales that incorporated cultural factors specific to

Latinos, most of our sample were Latino immigrants, many of them illegally in the U.S. When interviewed about the evaluation process before receiving parent training, it became clear that most of the parents exaggerated the positiveness of their family situation on the pre-test because they were worried about how we would perceive them. This is consistent with the work of Shrout, et.al. (2008) who found elevated levels of self report misrepresentation from this population due to their illegal status, despite specific guarantees of anonymity. Our participants did not know us well enough to trust that we would not judge them or have them deported.

In addition, these rating scales were developed for the evaluation of educational programs for at-risk adolescents and their parents. When attempting to evaluate counseling interventions, however, participants frequently do not understand the scope and depth of their family issues until they are IN the counseling process. After working with the counselor for a while, participants usually increase their trust and begin to open up more about their true feelings about their problems. During the counseling process, parents often are unable to remain in denial and gain more understanding about the difficulties that are facing them. The data obtained in the post surveys, while positive, appeared to reflect a deeper understanding of the reality of their family situation. These ratings were not as high as the pre-treatment ratings that appear to be based on the participants' attempts to portray an idealized view of family functioning to the counselors. We have used the term "Immigrant Halo Effect" to describe this idealized response when immigrants are first asked about family functioning.

It also was very difficult to complete the comparison group study due to ethical considerations. We originally began the study with 20 students and their families, 10 receiving immediate family counseling with the other 10 receiving traditional school counseling services (individual and group counseling) while they waited 3 months to receive SBFC family counseling. Due to the needs of the comparison group families, it was necessary to work with some of them sooner than planned, which led to disruption of the comparison group design. For example, a child from one waiting list family spoke of an incident involving child abuse during an individual counseling session with a school counselor. This necessitated a report to a social service agency, which resulted in the father being forced to leave the house. This caused the family to go into crisis and be seen by the SBFC before the father could return to the home. Similarly, another waiting list family's father lost his job, which resulted in the family having to be helped to relocate and change schools. While these cases ultimately resulted in positive outcomes because of the SBFC, the families were not able to be included in the evaluation data.

These challenges reflect the reality that referred families often have immediate crises that require individual or group counseling. While ethically important to provide timely services to these subject families in crisis, this also results in derailment of wait-list evaluation plans, especially when the pool of referred participants is small. This data collection process highlights some of the inherent difficulties of doing evaluation research of SBFC where often little control over the chaotic lives of research subjects from marginalized populations is possible. To address these challenges, future evaluation designs based on multi-site, larger family samples are needed to explore the efficacy of the SBFC model in relation to traditional school counseling services.

We also examined pre and post SBFC Interviews with teachers and parents related to their evaluation of the child. The SBFC Interview is a brief, structured interview format that assesses

the viewpoints of teachers, parents, and students and leads to structured interventions to be implemented by members of the school and family systems (See Appendix A) (Carter & Evans, 2008). This interview focuses on the respondents' views of the student's strengths, challenging behaviors, previously attempted interventions, and underlying causes of behavior. After the family received SBFC family counseling, the SBFC interviews were conducted again. The post interviews were more positive, but it was difficult to document change related to SBFC interventions because of the prompts used in the interview. This brief interview was specifically developed for problem assessment rather than analysis of progress in dealing with the problem, which hindered our ability to develop themes related to counseling and academic success as a function of the SBFC experience.

Empirical Hopes

The pilot evaluation efforts described above, while not successful in obtaining significant data, did provide us with a great deal of knowledge and experience about the process of SBFC evaluation. As a result of these efforts, we concluded that there was a need to move past individually-oriented pre- and post- self-report measures to the use of behavioral indicators such as school engagement, drop-out risk, grades, attendance and behavioral referrals. Concurrently, however, we acknowledge a statistical power issue with quantitative evaluations of the SBFC model which, because of the intensity of the intervention, often results in small numbers of subjects.

Because of these issues, we advocate for mixed method designs of SBFC activities that can mitigate the weaknesses of any one data collection strategy. While we will continue to get feedback from the major stakeholders affected by SBFC interventions through video interviews (qualitative indicators), it is increasingly important to also collect academic and behavioral indicators (quantitative). That is, we plan to monitor academic achievement and behavioral referrals before and after treatment, but also collect qualitative data through interviews and observation that can provide a richer understanding of the links between student problems and SBFC interventions that result in student success. For example, for students who are English Language Learners (ELL), is a referral for class disruption related to talking back to the teacher or asking a classmate in Spanish for help in understanding the material? Is noncompliance with a teacher request related to oppositional behavior or not understanding the request? For some students, is an attendance issue related to student behavior or due to a family crisis or chronic family dysfunction? These examples underscore the need for qualitative exploration of quantitative results.

Another strategy to address the challenges associated with the evaluation of interventions with small numbers of participants is to expand the number of intervention and control school sites in SBFC evaluation designs. Such cluster evaluations also help to buffer against the challenges described above in conducting waitlist designs. If limited resources curb this approach, a staggered waiting list design can be developed by approaching new school sites with the focus on collecting data during an initial year and then providing SBFC services during the second year. The video of the interviews with principals can be useful in the recruitment of other sites by introducing new schools to the nature and benefit of SBFC in a meaningful manner.

The development of more explicit contracts with schools regarding mutual expectations about the length, content and process of SBFC implementation and evaluation is another important

aspect of conducting empirical SBFC research. This may involve a checklist of SBFC counseling and facilitation services provided at the site, as well as a specific description of the role and function of the SBFC site supervisor in implementation and evaluation.

Another area of exploration is the nature of the facilitation role of the SBFC mentioned previously in many of the interviews with the principals. Their comments regarding the skill set of the SBFC (e.g. family counseling, communication enhancement, expertise in social and emotional development and prevention) to effectively resolve conflicts between students, parents, teachers, administrators and faculty appears to be an important element in the effectiveness of the SBFC compared with traditional school counselors. However, examining this role through quantitative measures may be difficult because of the multifaceted nature of the facilitation process. Qualitative strategies are needed, such as the use of interviews with teachers, parents, and administrators along with other qualitative data from open-ended survey items and focus groups. Such strategies will need to be developed in order to capture the basic elements of the facilitation role of the SBFC, and to assist in formative and impact assessments of the critical skills and knowledge necessary to be effective.

When the SBFC model was first described, it was an aspiration to provide schools with an on-site resource for helping students, families and schools work together for the success of the child. It was proposed that by working directly in a systemic way with families and other important stakeholders, a “backstop” would be provided for intervening with problems that go beyond the scope of traditional school counseling or mental health services. The focus on prevention and postvention procedures provide a “go-to” professional who can improve school climate by addressing a wider range of problems that inhibit the school’s ability to improve academic achievement and social development. This can reduce stress for all stakeholders and lead to a sense of connectedness in their efforts to improve the daily lives of children within their community.

As noted throughout this paper, some school counselors and mental health service providers have been effective in this facilitation role, depending on their unique skill-set or emphasis, but the specific training and knowledge of effective facilitation has not been a focused component. The current political and economic climate in the United States has severely reduced the presence of school counselors and mental health providers in the schools, and intensifies the urgency to increase the efficiency of educating children. The ability of the SBFC to facilitate the connections between participants in our schools so that they work more effectively is critical in managing the problems facing many schools today.

While the themes from interviews with principals reflect the importance of the multi-faceted facilitation role of the SBFC, what is needed is more information about the specific components and experiences of those involved with the SBFC model. This includes gathering data about procedures and training, and also interviews with counselors who have worked in traditional school counselor or mental health roles in the schools, and who also have exposure to the SBFC model. For example, what are the strengths and challenges of implementing this role and how does this affect the counselor’s feelings of effectiveness and satisfaction in working in the school?

Summary

In summary, it is clear that the SBFC strategies described here have had a considerable impact on those who have experienced even a partial implementation of the model. Teachers, parents, and administrators see the benefits and unique contributions of SBFC in helping urban schools deal with the most significant challenges of educating children. What is now needed is the gathering of systematic empirical evidence of the SBFC role that includes metrics such as student attendance, behavior and academic achievement. More rigorous quantitative and qualitative evaluation of the SBFC model may provide evidence of its benefit and efficiency in addressing barriers to student learning. This type of evidence is needed to persuade those in control of funding and oversight of educational institutions that the SBFC model can indeed lead to enhanced academic success; resulting in additional ‘warm feelings’ and commitment from school administrators, teachers, families, and students to the SBFC model.

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Appendix A - SBFC Interview Form

Student _____

Date _____

Teacher _____

Contact # _____

Grade/Tr/Rm _____

P. Plus Personnel _____

Called Scheduled appt. _____ had 1st appt. Result _____

Strengths _____ **Challenges** _____ **Ability to use 3 rules of Kinder** _____ **Interventions tried/Comments**
Teacher

Parent

Further Comments _____

Classroom

Behavior:

Strategy:

Family