



Rural Parents and Teachers as Partners: Preliminary Results of a Randomized Trial

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It is clearly recognized that families have a significant effect on students' development, and the active engagement of parents is a positive predictor of academic and social-behavioral adjustment (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). The effects of programs aimed at supporting students who are struggling are enhanced when partnerships with families are integrated into the design and implementation of support programs, thereby creating connections and continuities across systems. Families in rural settings have particular challenges accessing care given problems with the availability and acceptability of services (DeLeon, Wakefield, & Hagglund, 2003). Although meaningful relationships with schools, access to effective services, and participation in these services are essential to address emotional/behavioral problems and promote learning, evidence-based family-school partnership interventions in rural settings have not been identified.

One model with empirical support is Conjoint Behavioral Consultation (CBC; Sheridan & Kratochwill, 2008). CBC is a structured indirect intervention with a dual focus on supporting students' social-behavioral and academic success, *and* promoting family-school partnerships to support student functioning across settings. Research on CBC has documented its positive effects on the behavioral, academic, and social-emotional functioning of students across diverse samples and settings (Sheridan et al., 2012; Sheridan, Clarke & Ransom, in press). However, the efficacy of CBC in rural settings, where access to services is limited, has not been examined.

Currently, a four-year randomized controlled trial (RCT) testing the efficacy of CBC in rural schools is being conducted in a largely rural Midwest state. U.S. Census Bureau definitions were used; both rural and towns comprised the sample. Preliminary results from the first two years of this study follow. The current sample contains 90 students (82% male) in grades K-3 and their parents, and 54 teachers from 20 schools. More than half of the sample (54%) lived at or below 150% of the poverty threshold. Two-thirds of the parents completed high school (or GED) as their highest degree; of these, 10% did not have a high school diploma. Consultants were trained individuals from outside the school district.

Student outcomes include measures of behavioral and social functioning. Parent and teacher outcomes include measures of parenting and classroom practices, parent and teacher relationship quality and engagement and participation in the consultation process. CBC was implemented in a small group format in rural classrooms with a teacher, parents of 1 to 3 students, and a consultant. In the CBC meetings each student's parents, teacher, and a consultant worked collaboratively to identify and define a target concern, determine data collection procedures, set behavioral goals, design an intervention using evidence-based procedures, and evaluate intervention effects. Methods to increase home-school communication, create continuity across settings, and establish meaningful partnerships between parents and teachers were employed.

Preliminary outcomes suggest significant group differences in favor of CBC students on teacher-reported broadband internalizing and behavioral symptoms scales (see Table 1 for significant group differences at post-test). Significant changes over time are evident for treatment but not control students for these as well as externalizing problems, school problems and adaptive skills. At home, differences for CBC students were reported for arguing, noncompliance, and tantrums (p 's < .05 or greater; see Table 2 for significant gains for the CBC group). For teachers, statistically significant group differences are evident in favor of the CBC group for their relationship with parents, effective strategy use, and participation in problem solving. Significant improvements over time are evident for treatment but not control teachers in relationship quality with parents (p 's < .05 or greater). For parents, significant group differences in favor of CBC participants are evident in problem solving, engagement, and relationship with teachers. Significant gains over time were evident for their effective use of parenting strategies, relationship with teachers, engagement, participation in problem solving and self-efficacy for treatment parents only (p 's < .05 or greater). Only two years of implementation are represented and analyses fail to consider important design issues; thus, findings are interpreted with caution.

Realities within rural communities influence the research being conducted on family-school partnerships. In some cases, the physical locations of school buildings, families' homes, and teachers' residences creates distance barriers for collaborative, relationship-building meetings. Small school size limits the number of students who can participate, often increasing the need for greater numbers of schools to fulfill sample requirements. Many of the families and teachers have long-standing relationships and histories of previous interactions (some predating current school situations) that influence their initial abilities to work together as partners. Families are sometimes reluctant to participate given the potential to associate services with "having a problem," particularly given the small size of the school and community. Small numbers of staff members in rural schools require the adoption of several responsibilities beyond typically defined requirements; thus, additional requirements associated with parental engagement and social-behavioral support may increase burden. On the other hand, school personnel in rural schools often have a "do what it takes" mentality and challenges are often usurped by individuals with the capacity to intervene early.

In addition to addressing questions of rurality, advances are being made in the area of family-school partnerships and social-behavioral interventions. Measures of engagement, participation, and family-school relationships are being collected. In addition, student behaviors at home and school are being positively impacted; methods to measure behaviors in a highly efficient manner (e.g., Parent Daily Reports) appear effective.

The practical issues associated with location, small size, staff resources, stigma, and personal histories/relationships contribute to challenges with several research activities. The cost associated with implementation of a relationship-based intervention (i.e., requiring many personal contacts including some that are face-to-face) is significant, particularly given few near-by personnel with the requisite background training to deliver the program. Data collection is similarly challenging when individualized assessments or direct observations are indicated. Efforts at reducing costs by streamlining resources and developing sensitive but efficient measures are being pursued.

The long-term benefit of interventions in rural schools is dependent upon the capacity of the system to sustain evidence-based programs within its typical structures. That is, it is necessary that interventions identified as efficacious through grant-supported research programs in highly controlled conditions be tested within the context of natural school practices. The effectiveness of CBC for promoting social and behavioral competence and family-school partnerships given a rural school's available internal resources (i.e., once an externally-supported program "goes away") requires research attention. Research is needed to determine methods to deliver CBC in rural schools with greater efficiency, while maintaining integrity of the process and student-focused interventions.

References

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