



Don't Put the Cart Before the Horse: Implementation of Mental Health Programs in Schools

A Review of

Implementation of Mental Health Programs in Schools: A Change Agent's Guide

by Susan G. Forman

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A kindergarten teacher seeking help begins describing the behavior of children in her classroom to the school psychologist, who begins to think in terms of delivering an intervention. When proposed, the teacher appears ambivalent, if not disinterested, in participating in a novel intervention—even one that is evidence based. The disappointed school psychologist considers why this might be the case and rightly concludes that even though she is knowledgeable about interventions that could address the teacher's concern, the teacher was not necessarily seeking help to implement novel practices in her classroom. The school psychologist failed to consider that having knowledge of evidence-based interventions does not mean stakeholders will value this and be eager to implement them. There are considerations prior to intervening that impact the implementation of the intervention; many of these considerations reflect the research-to-practice gap. *Implementation of Mental Health Programs in Schools: A Change Agent's Guide* is a resource that can assist with this task.

The problem of failing to utilize a knowledge base that is supported by research is not limited to school-based professionals; there is a broad and extensive literature on implementation spanning fields illustrating this. Forman explains the implementation process, reviews the theoretical and research literature related to it, and describes the leadership role and characteristics necessary for effective implementation. She goes on to explain the details of the process from intervention selection to gaining the support of individuals and the organization. The importance of treatment fidelity and the possible need for adaptation of an intervention for the practice setting, including meeting the needs of diverse clients are important considerations that take place prior to intervening. Sustaining the changes in practice made when the intervention is complete is the last element in this cycle of practice. Thus, consideration of implementation issues can make it more likely that

an intervention will be well planned and followed up because there is a complete cycle of practice.

Forman effectively deconstructs the implementation process, carefully explaining how the elements of implementation influence whether the intervention happens in the first place and, for interventions in progress, how thorough attention to implementation, emphasizing details, facilitates the delivery of the intervention as intended, or with integrity.

Implementation is a process that occurs in stages (Fixsen, Naoom, Blasé, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005) and within a social system that influences implementers, reflecting organizational culture. Making adaptations to an established intervention that balances the needs of the setting with the maintenance of treatment integrity (see Mychailyszyn, 2015, for a discussion) is often needed in schools. For example, adjusting the amount of time given to a session of intervention to coincide with the class periods in a school day limits disruption to instruction, yet the "syllabus" for the intervention may need to be reorganized to make this a viable option.

Good preparation for the intervention is a precondition for meaningful outcome evaluation. It is important to know the specific precursors to, and conditions of, an intervention in order to interpret the intervention outcome; in other words, the linkage of implementation to intervention outcome must be clear. That permits replication of a successful intervention with a novel sample, which is a step in advancing practice by moving interventions from clinical trials to practice in organizations such as schools. Moreover, the linkages between the elements of implementation and a failed intervention are a source of feedback, which allows the psychologist to revisit and strengthen the weak links implementing an intervention that had an outcome that was less than anticipated. Evaluation of interventions is important for accountability.

Implementation Issues and School Psychology

School psychologists would do well to consider their leadership style and skill set and how these influences their ability to gain stakeholder support. Considerable wisdom, clinical acumen, reasoning skills, and the ability to provide assistance in a collegial manner are all important to facilitate implementation. Because of the way teacher accountability and effectiveness are conceptualized, today's teachers face pressures that their predecessors did not. Moreover, laypersons implementing evidence-based behavioral interventions generally do not appreciate the complexity and level of attention to detail required. Thus, what seems intuitive is deceiving because it is labor intensive and requires a substantial time commitment. Without consideration of these implementation issues, the intervention is likely to fail and the teacher will likely conclude that it does not work. The organizational context and the supports available provide a context for the intervention and will essentially determine whether the intervention can be implemented in the first place. While these variables are important, treatment integrity and adaptation of interventions, especially for ethnic minorities, merit additional attention.

Treatment integrity is conceptualized in terms of the intervention components and the amounts delivered as well as how the intervention was delivered and its manner of delivery (Sanetti & Kratochwill, 2009); this ideally occurs within a context of adherence or the consistency of intervention delivery with what is manualized. Measurement of treatment integrity during the implementation process can allow for modifications to be made, which

will permit the intervention to go forward. Well-intentioned implementers who do not adhere to procedures may undermine the intervention, precluding meaningful evaluation. For this reason, some researchers are contending that evidence-based interventions should have adaptations built in so that implementers know up front which adaptations might be acceptable. Moreover, this can help sustain the use of intervention when the school psychologist is no longer directly involved. In addition, the core components of the intervention must be identified, and professional development that includes an understanding of the interventions (including theoretical underpinnings and what to expect, both explained in lay language) and coaching is necessary (Webster-Stratton, Reinke, Herman, & Newomer, 2011). These are extremely important issues for school-based practice because until this becomes the norm, despite organizational support and stakeholder buy-in, these issues can become barriers that will limit intervention effectiveness and ultimately sustainability.

Culturally competent service delivery is important. An intervention will not be used if it does not fit with the setting and client needs; this underscores the need to consider adaptations of interventions that are population appropriate. Because the literature generally shows that cognitive and behavior interventions yield desirable results with ethnic minority clients, one view is that evidence-based interventions can be adapted to be culturally appropriate while maintaining what have been shown to be the essential elements, providing these are delivered with integrity. Unknown is whether the essential elements perform in the same manner across populations, making this a legitimate research question. Because schools are likely the most diverse practice setting, psychologists are faced with varied situations and diverse individuals requiring intervention, making this information particularly important.

Conclusions

This book will be useful to psychologists who are school district employees as well as those who function as consultants from outside the system. Early career school psychologists will benefit from the discussion of the complexity of the process of implementing mental health interventions because that material may not be covered sufficiently in their graduate training; this may make them more realistic practitioners. Seasoned school psychologists will benefit from the research base that organizes and makes useable the knowledge that they may have accrued over years of experience. Psychologists who are employed as consultants will benefit because some may not have a good understanding of the organizational culture of schools and how it differs from independent practice settings. Researchers benefit because research is stimulated on the implementation process in schools, which is needed in order to help implementers carry out interventions with integrity and improve service delivery to youngsters. Ultimately, collaboration between seasoned school psychologists and researchers may be one of the best ways to advance the field while providing high-quality interventions in a high-quality manner to meet the unmet mental health needs of the school-aged population.

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