

# Best Practices

## Mental Health Research in K–12 Schools: Translating a Systems Approach to University–School Partnerships

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The authors discuss the challenges that researchers from university and community systems face in gaining access to and partnering with K–12 school systems to conduct research. Borrowing from Szapocznik, Hervis, and Schwartz's (2003) brief strategic family theory and therapy and Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986) ecological systems theory, the authors outline a model for diverse research communities in the United States that can be used by counselors and other mental health services researchers who plan to conduct research in K–12 schools.

Researchers from university and community systems often report numerous challenges in gaining access to and partnering with K–12 school systems (Bullough, Draper, Smith, & Birrell, 2004; Owens & Murphy, 2004; Palladino, 2005; Powers, 2007; Rowell, 2005; Thorkildsen & Stein, 1996). K–12 school members have an understandable history of being suspicious of university-generated mental health research (Bullough et al., 2004; Mayers & Schnorr, 2003; Owens & Murphy, 2004; Rowell, 2005). Traditionally, the relationship has been hierarchically structured, with the university researcher in a position of authority as one who holds the power obtained through capital such as grant funding and support, expert knowledge, and needed resources (e.g., mental health services; Crawford, Roberts, & Hickman, 2009; Mayers & Schnorr, 2003; Stinchfield & Zyromski, 2010). In addition, the university–school partnership has been structured according to the interests of the researcher, with the school often serving merely as a provider of research participants (Owens & Murphy, 2004). In the context of this framework, the preferences and goals of the school are not cocreated or incorporated into the research process (Chinman et al., 2005; Miller & Shinn, 2005; Owens & Murphy, 2004). Moreover, researchers oftentimes collect data but fail to provide results of the study or feedback regarding the issues under investigation. This history has resulted in university researchers being viewed as outsiders imposing their research agendas upon the schools. Thus, K–12 school members are often reluctant to grant university researchers access to and partnership with their school systems (Bullough et al., 2004; Powers, 2007; Rowell, 2005, 2006; Thorkildsen & Stein, 1996).

Disentangling how to establish and sustain successful, authentic partnerships with K–12 schools is important because these schools can serve as rich contexts for conducting mental health and health-related research (Crawford et al., 2009; Hooper & Newman, 2011; Mayers & Schnorr, 2003; Owens & Murphy, 2004). Reaching out to and connecting with various and diverse school systems to form successful partnerships require thoughtful conceptual models and strategies (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Hudson, Windham, & Hooper, 2005). In this article, we offer suggestions related to this long-reported problem: What models exist to assist university researchers on how to partner with K–12 schools successfully and thoughtfully? We argue that systems theory—both family and ecological—provides a useful and meaningful conceptual model to buttress ethical and culturally tailored methods to successfully partner with the K–12 school community when conducting research in those schools (Hooper, 2009).

### Models to Guide University–School Partnerships

The organizational system of K–12 schools is similar to that of families. For example, similar to and parallel with family systems, school systems are often organized by a hierarchical structure of interrelated and interdependent subsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986; Palladino, 2005; Stinchfield & Zyromski, 2010). Szapocznik's Brief Strategic Family Therapy (BSFT; Szapocznik, Hervis, & Schwartz, 2003), an evidence-based counseling model undergirded by family systems theory, was originally developed to address the

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uniqueness of each family system while targeting common organizational and hierarchical structures to facilitate change in adolescents with a range of behavioral (conduct disorder) and mental health concerns (substance use disorders) and their families (Szapocznik & Williams, 2000). BSFT strategies may inform the process through which university researchers and K–12 schools engage and partner, while simultaneously fostering respect for the unique culture of each K–12 school (i.e., culturally tailoring *each* collaboration and research effort with *each* K–12 school). Just as BSFT therapists acknowledge and address the influence of a family’s prior experiences with and beliefs about therapy (Muir, Schwartz, & Szapocznik, 2004), university researchers should acknowledge the historical relationship between universities and K–12 school systems (Powers, 2007).

In addition to BSFT, Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1986) ecological systems theory (EST) can also help university researchers respectfully enter and exit a K–12 school system. For example, in our current research with K–12 schools, the first author considered both the specific school system (or context) in which she was attempting to enter as well as school members inside the school (school counselors, nurses) and other members outside the school (e.g., parents, superintendents, and other health care providers) who may be working with the school faculty and the students. These considerations showed respect for the existing relationships that the school members had, as well as the context in which the school was embedded, and thus facilitated the process of gaining entry (i.e., respectfully entering) into the school. The same considerations mentioned earlier were noted when ending the research study and, thus, exiting the school as well (e.g., how might the research topics be expanded or sustained).

EST emphasizes the interaction between and among multiple systems and subsystems—human and environmental. Thus, Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1986) theory can guide university researchers in considering meso-, exo-, and macrosystems of the K–12 school above and beyond the individual and context being studied directly (e.g., microsystem—adolescent and family system or student and school system). The EST model is useful in explaining how successful university–school, research-focused partnerships can be sustained in schools during and after conducting mental health research in K–12 schools; this is an important component that is often missing from commonly used models that are used to conduct research on schools rather than with schools.

Several existing models have been suggested to improve relationships with research sites, foster alliances, and conduct research successfully in K–12 schools (see Palladino, 2005; Rowell, 2005, 2006; Stinchfield & Zyromski, 2010). One is a collaborative action research model (Lewin, 1946). According to Rowell (2006), *action research* is “an orientation toward inquiry and the human capacity to take action to make changes; action research is by nature collaborative, realistic, and empowering” (p. 377). Collaborative action research has

been adapted to help school counselors “strengthen the link between practice and research” (Rowell, 2005, p. 28). The model proposed by Rowell (2005, 2006) has utility for and application to counseling research in K–12 schools, although it appears to be uniquely focused on school counselors and how to improve the field of school counseling (e.g., “How can school counseling practices in local schools be strengthened?” [see Rowell, 2005, p. 30]). Additionally, Rowell’s model fails to consider the interactive element of person (student) and the nested environments relevant to research in K–12 schools (e.g., neighborhood, community, and society).

Another model, described by Palladino (2005), outlines the value of social action and collaboration when joining with low-resource K–12 schools and communities. Palladino recognized the importance of transdisciplinary research teams and the need to form successful collaborative alliances in order to carry out social action research and training models in multiple contexts and settings. The attention to cultural factors and social justice issues are major strengths of this model, which was informed by Erikson’s (1968) theory. Like Rowell’s (2005) model, Palladino’s (2005) model is limited by its focus on the university and school system only, potentially missing out on other cultural factors evinced in systems that are external to the school.

A third model emphasizes how critical multidisciplinary approaches are when working with multiple systems (e.g., students, families, and communities). In their model, Stinchfield and Zyromski (2010) underscored the multiple roles (advocates, facilitators, and collaborators) that the school counselor must carry out to collaborate successfully, improve relationships with multiple stakeholders, foster alliances, and engender positive outcomes. Using Adlerian theory as the underpinnings of their multicontextual, multipronged parent education model, the authors were able to increase their collaborative efforts between school and university partners (Stinchfield & Zyromski, 2010). This model is the most similar to our proposed model. Stinchfield and Zyromski emphasized the importance of including multiple systems and stakeholders that are internal and external to the school system in the development and sustainability of effective mental health intervention models. A possible limitation of the model proffered by Stinchfield and Zyromski is that it was delimited to parent-participants.

Mental health researchers who conduct research with K–12 schools could benefit from using any of the previously mentioned models. In fact, there are similarities, common factors, and overlap between these models and our proposed model. It is significant to note that there are also differences. First, the specific theoretical concepts that underpin BSFT and that are included in our proposed model lend themselves to the unique research process in K–12 schools (e.g., concepts such as hierarchies, subsystems, and joining). Second, knowledge about and skill with gatekeeping and the issue of who holds the power in the school system are often critical to successfully conducting research in K–12 schools. Similar to working with family systems, and the

often seen issue of power in families, BSFT can help with the process of establishing who holds the power and how to approach gatekeeping in K–12 schools effectively. Third, the proposed model, which includes EST, emphasizes the school system and other systems in which the K–12 school is embedded. This allows for the inclusion of culturally salient factors such as values, barriers, and strengths of the surrounding neighborhood and broader communities that likely have an impact on the research being conducted. In contrast, the previously reviewed models, with the exception of the model developed by Stinchfield and Zyromski (2010), delimit their focus to the school system. This may limit the cultural responsiveness of the research process described in the other models.

In this article, we propose a theory-driven model for counselors and other mental health services researchers conducting research with K–12 schools; the model is based on BSFT and EST. The model includes the cultural tailoring of the research process such that it is in the best interest of the school, specifically, conveying respect for the unique culture of the school; working within the existing school structure and power hierarchy; gaining the trust of the students, families, schools, and community members; recognizing the researcher’s role as that of a guest in the school (Owens & Murphy, 2004); and presenting problem-focused, culturally relevant solutions to the expressed needs of the school and interests of the researcher (Bullough et al., 2004; Hooper, 2009; Powers, 2007). We believe that our model explicitly illustrates a useful framework for counselors who want to conduct mental health and other health-related research in culturally, linguistically, and geographically diverse K–12 schools. In this article, we also provide specific examples of how the first author has used the proposed model. Illustrations include how she has translated and tailored BSFT and EST concepts in her counseling-focused research on depression and comorbid obesity in K–12 schools.

As previously mentioned, we recognize that there are other models from which counseling researchers may select (e.g., Lewin, 1946; Palladino, 2005; Rowell, 2005; Stinchfield & Zyromski, 2010). We believe, however, that our model may have utility in helping counseling researchers carry out the research process and improve the relationship with individuals at the research sites by using a family counseling approach. Similarly, we believe that an ecological systems approach helps underscore the importance of understanding the context (the school and beyond) in which these processes take place. We believe that our model’s focus on the process, relationship, and context concurrently makes it unique among other models that counseling researchers might use.

### EST

Developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979), EST emphasizes the importance of examining the contexts in which the phe-

nomenon being studied (e.g., students) is embedded and exploring the interaction between and among those contexts. Bronfenbrenner identified four nested systems in which individual phenomena are embedded: micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems (see Figure 1). For example, researchers who are interested in examining adolescent mental health would benefit from examining individual-level factors (e.g., adolescent characteristics such as age, race, and gender), family-level factors (e.g., family conflict, family cohesion), school- and community-level factors (e.g., access to mental health services), and the interaction between and among these numerous factors, as well as how they may exacerbate or serve as risk factors for the adolescent and the outcome being studied (e.g., depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, bullying, obesity; see e.g., Grzywacz & Fuqua, 2000; Hooper, Burnham, & Richey, 2009; Windham, Hooper, & Hudson, 2005). Researchers should also consider how these contexts or nested systems may serve as support systems or engender protective factors for the adolescent and the outcome being studied.

According to Bronfenbrenner (1979) and other scholars (Berry, 1995; Grzywacz & Fuqua, 2000; Palladino, 2005), when investigating health-related issues, the researcher cannot ignore the context in which participants exist. An EST-focused researcher believes that investigating any phenomenon solely at the individual level (i.e., at the microlevel) yields an incomplete, insignificant, and largely meaningless understanding (Hoffman, 1981). Consequently, therapists or counselors



FIGURE 1

### Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986) Ecological Systems Model

*Note.* The student/adolescent is embedded in nested systems that are interactive and bidirectional (person–environment interactions).

should clarify the relevance and influence of their clients' environments (e.g., the family, peer systems, neighborhoods, cultural context, societal) on presenting problems and possible solutions when conducting health-related research (Muir et al., 2004; Nichols & Schwartz, 2006; Palladino, 2005; Szapocznik et al., 2003).

EST complements family systems theory well because family systems theory focuses on the family (or, in our translated model, the school), whereas EST focuses on the broader systems that influence the student and school (or, in our model, the community, neighborhood, and societal contexts). The school system is not an autonomous independent entity but is influenced by numerous contextual and interrelated systems and factors. In our proposed model, the process of investigating mental health and other health-related outcomes of K–12 students is complete, comprehensive, holistic, multifactorial, multisystemic, and (most importantly) culturally responsive. Although there are few empirical studies that report on EST being used as a therapeutic intervention (see Feaster et al., 2010; Slesnick & Prestopnik, 2009; Szapocznik et al., 2003), a plethora of empirical research has reported on the utility of EST when working with multiple systems (cf. Davison & Birch, 2001; Grzywacz & Fuqua, 2000; Hooper et al., 2010; Moos, 1979; Stokols, 1996). Finally, BSFT is the primary focus of the proposed model. However, EST bolsters and augments the BSFT portion of the model by purposefully and intentionally targeting factors, supportive networks, and resources found in those systems that are external to the school that may impinge upon the research process and the research relationship with K–12 schools. A model that excludes a consideration of the other important systems (meso-, exo-, and macrosystems) in which student-participants, families, and schools live and operate (see Figure 1) could omit important systemic and cultural factors (i.e., leverage points) that may be related to the mental health constructs, processes, and outcomes being investigated. Finally, inclusion of and support from individuals in these external systems may also help with recruitment, data collection, implementation of interventions, and successful completion of mental health research in the schools (Hooper, 2009). The central focus of person (student) and environment (system) fit in EST broadens the benefits of using BSFT in mental health research in K–12 schools.

## ■ BSFT

A rich body of empirical studies has reported on the efficacy and effectiveness of BSFT (Distelberg, 2008; Muir et al., 2004; Santisteban, Suarez-Morales, Robbins, & Szapocznik, 2006). Developed by Szapocznik, BSFT is a brief intervention model that targets maladaptive patterns of interactions within families (Szapocznik et al., 2003; Szapocznik & Williams, 2000). Therapists using BSFT also seek to uncover strengths or positive interactions and patterns of behavior in the family that may prove useful in engendering therapeutic

change (Distelberg, 2008). Three central constructs serve as the conceptual bases of BSFT: systems, structures, and strategies (Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1989). Defined as an “organized whole that is comprised of parts that are interdependent or interrelated” (Szapocznik & Williams, 2000, p. 119), a *system* is organized through the interaction of the behaviors of its members. Within a family system, the repetitive patterns of interaction and the subsystems (e.g., parental, spousal, sibling) form the family's unique structure. BSFT therapists use practical, problem-focused, and deliberate interventions as the strategies for challenging maladaptive family structures and patterns of interaction and reinforcing flexible and adaptive family structures and patterns of interaction (Santisteban et al., 2006).

A central axiom of the BSFT model is overcoming a family's resistance to therapy that prevents the formation of a successful therapeutic alliance. The first step in the therapeutic process is acknowledging this resistance and applying targeted strategies to challenge it. BSFT counselors and therapists believe that regardless of the presenting symptoms, the initial focus of counseling is resistance, and unless this is challenged, no change will occur (Coatsworth, Santisteban, McBride, & Szapocznik, 2001). BSFT postulates that resistance is best understood in a systems context, and effectively challenging resistance requires the counselor to address cultural and historical factors that may foster resistance, including preconceived notions of counseling based on cultural stigma, patterns of interaction within the family that foster resistance to outside influence, and past experiences or failed attempts at therapy (Merrick, 1995; Soo-Hoo, 1999).

A second axiom of the BSFT model that renders BSFT applicable to working with schools is the focus on forming and maintaining a therapeutic alliance (Hudson et al., 2005). The BSFT therapist has the goal of becoming a temporary member of the family in order to be accepted as an insider. This is a crucial component in working *with* the family to effect change, as opposed to imposing change upon the family as an outsider. The focus on the therapeutic alliance, which is undergirded by successful joining (which is described later in this article), makes the BSFT model appropriate for researchers attempting to gain access to and partner with schools.

The current trend in K–12 school research is to collaborate with the school system as an equal partner (Dumka, Mauricio, & Gonzales, 2007; Palladino, 2005; Rowell, 2005, 2006). Collaboration is “an interactive process among individuals and organizations with diverse expertise and resources, joining together to devise and execute plans for common goals as well as to generate solutions for complex problems” (Gronski & Pigg, 2000, p. 783). The BSFT therapist focuses on joining within the existing family structure and acknowledging the unique goals of each member, thereby creating egalitarian partnerships with family members. Bolstering our rationale for the translation and application of BSFT to the university–school research partnership is the established efficacy and

effectiveness of BSFT as a therapeutic intervention with families (Muir et al., 2004; Santisteban et al., 2006). Three decades of empirical research supports the efficacy and effectiveness of BSFT with culturally diverse families (Distelberg, 2008; Muir et al., 2004). We believe that the BSFT model can be equally effective in research with K–12 schools.

### ■ Translating BSFT Strategies to University–School Research-Focused Partnerships

School systems, like family systems, consist of interdependent and interrelated individual members. Thus, it is less effective and less efficient to work solely with individuals or small groups than it is to work with larger systems because the researcher’s contact with any member will likely have an impact on the entire system (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Marotta, 2002; Muir et al., 2004). Likewise, when encountering resistance from an individual member of the school system, the researcher must acknowledge that this resistance is likely a result of numerous influential others who have interacted with this individual in the past (Mayers & Schnorr, 2003).

Just as the family structure is the target of BSFT strategies, so too must the university researcher target the structure of the school to identify appropriate points of entry (Powers, 2007). Thus, the BSFT model provides a relevant framework for researchers to work within the existing structure of the school system to form effective partnerships. Moreover, as proposed by Szapocznik et al. (2003), the BSFT model is collaborative and efficient; BSFT strategies are designed to be

problem-focused, concise, and deliberate (Distelberg, 2008; Santisteban et al., 2006).

In the BSFT model, several core constructs that are operationalized as strategies guide therapists through the family counseling process. Szapocznik and colleagues (see Muir et al., 2004; Szapocznik et al., 2003; Szapocznik & Williams, 2000) have proposed that six of these strategies are particularly relevant in effectively partnering with school systems for the purpose of conducting culturally tailored mental health research: joining, clarifying relevant subsystems, tracking, mimesis, reframing, and considering cultural contexts. Table 1 relates these strategies to K–12 school research.

#### Joining

Of all the constructs outlined in BSFT and many other family systems models, the most critical and foundational is joining. Joining is a family systems term “for accepting and accommodating to families to win their confidence and circumvent resistance” (Nichols & Schwartz, 2006, p. 446). Joining refers to the steps a counselor takes to establish trust with all family members, prepare the family for change, and gain a temporary position of leadership within the family. Stated another way, joining is the glue that holds the therapeutic process together or the needed soil from which everything (viz., the process) grows (Hooper, 2009). Without successfully joining, meaningful and successful therapeutic work is quite unlikely.

Through the process of joining, the counselor facilitates the family’s acceptance of the therapeutic relationship by presenting himself or herself as an ally and attempting to fit in within the family’s existing structure (Santisteban et al.,

TABLE 1

**Strategies of Brief Strategic Family Therapy (BSFT) Translated to University–School Partnerships in Mental Health Research**

BSFT Strategy	Relevance to Conducting Research in K–12 Schools
<i>Joining:</i> Join with the system and subsystems.	For the initial meeting, the goal of university researchers is to reach out to and connect (join) with a range of school personnel (follow the lead of the school personnel). Joining happens from the beginning of the university–school partnership until the end of the partnership.
<i>Clarifying relevant subsystems:</i> Clarify the seminal systems and subsystems embedded inside and outside the school.	After the initial meeting, further clarify who makes up what system and subsystem; also, consider systems and subsystems inside the school (coaches, teachers, students) and outside the school (parents, superintendents, community leaders).
<i>Tracking:</i> Observe and track school staff and personnel who have the power and may assist with joining and the university–school, research-focused partnership.	Monitor with whom you ought to partner; consider people who operate inside and outside of the school. Schools vary on who holds the power and makes the decisions (e.g., parent-centered, student-centered, hierarchical). Avoid making assumptions regarding who may hold the power in the school system.
<i>Mimesis:</i> Use mimesis to demonstrate a respect for and attention to the culture and language of the school.	To aid in the joining process, consider adopting the language of the school and community. Also, when discussing the goal of the research, the university researcher should avoid using jargon and terms that may not be regularly used in the school. Remember that you are a guest in the school and follow the school’s rules and culture. Consider including translators and translated materials when appropriate.
<i>Reframing:</i> Use reframing to address research questions and areas that may be perceived by the school as deficits or pathological.	Reframing allows the school to consider the research topic or “problem” in a different light. It is also a great way to talk about the research topic in a nonblaming way.
<i>Considering cultural contexts:</i> Consider the broader cultural context in which the school is embedded.	Take into consideration the broader context (societal, community, economy, and other broader factors) that may impinge upon a successful university–school partnership (see Figure 1).

1997; Szapocznik et al., 2003). An essential component in successful joining is respect for the existing family structure and power systems. By acknowledging this structure, the counselor is able to approach the family as an insider and become part of the system. Respect for the family structure does not imply that the counselor approves of this structure, but rather conveys to the family an understanding of the unique family structure and a respect for and willingness to work within it. Thus, the counselor is acknowledging the family's uniqueness and voice and establishing family members as partners in the therapeutic process (Distelberg, 2008; Muir et al., 2004). The criticality of the joining process, which commences at the beginning of therapy and ends on the last day of therapy, cannot be overstated. Failure to successfully join with a family is predictive of a lack of success in the requisite therapeutic work that needs to be done.

Joining can be used to form successful university–school research partnerships. Analogous to a family's resistance to enter into a therapeutic partnership with an outsider (counselor), schools often resist entering into a research partnership with an outsider (university researcher; Stinchfield & Zyromski, 2010). Using the joining principles of respect and alliance, the researcher can effectively address this resistance and gain acceptance as a temporary member within the school's existing structure. Just as the counselor must show respect for a family's unique structure and voice, so too must the researcher acknowledge the uniqueness of each individual school. Furthermore, the university researcher must consider the research purpose and process from the school's perspective. He or she must acknowledge the specific needs and concerns of the school, as well as respect any resistance or hesitation that may impede successful entry into the school. For example, previous researchers' failed attempts may impinge upon future researchers' success in gaining access to the school. Additionally, similar to family members having a healthy suspicion about counseling and therapy and what will be required, schools and the members of the school system may be suspicious about mental health research (Owens & Murphy, 2004). Normalizing and acknowledging these fears and sources of resistance convey respect for the school's uniqueness, culture, and voice, as well as the school's important role as partner and cocreator in the research process.

#### Clarifying Relevant Subsystems

To effectively enter into the existing family structure, the counselor must clarify the subsystems (i.e., what they are and who is in them) underlying the unique family structure. Family systems theorists and therapists believe that it is critical to consider both formal (e.g., parents, spouses, siblings) and informal (e.g., those who control finances, those who maintain the household) subsystems embedded within the family structure (Distelberg, 2008). Identification of these subsystems, as well as understanding each family member's identification with these subsystems, is a critical component

of understanding the unique composition of the family and determining the therapist's position within these subsystems (Szapocznik et al., 2003).

There are numerous subsystems within and outside the structure of a school, just as there are within families. These include both formal subsystems (e.g., administrators, academic departments, athletic teams) and informal subsystems (e.g., veteran teachers, faculty alliances, influential parents, community members, community organizations; Marotta, 2002). The researcher must identify these subsystems and acknowledge the unique role that each plays in maintaining the existing structure of the school. The importance of systems both inside and outside of the school cannot be overstated. For example, families may play a significant role in establishing "buy-in" from the school (Merrick, 1995). Researchers must identify the individuals in these subsystems who have power in the school, which is also related to the tracking process (described next). By identifying the individuals and/or groups that hold key leadership roles, the university researcher can determine who ought to be a collaborator and partner in the research process. Those who hold the power can provide both the easiest means of entry into the school's structure and conversely the most powerful resistance to successful joining. Thus, it is imperative for the researcher to respect the existing power structure and work within this structure to present him- or herself as an ally or guest.

#### Tracking

BSFT incorporates tracking as a means to understand subsystems and identify the individuals who hold the power within these systems. Tracking involves observation of the communication flow among stakeholders, focusing on the content (subject matter) and process (communication style and nonverbal behavior) of this communication. BSFT therapists focus on the process of communication to identify power structures within families. Similarly, the university researcher must observe interactions among members of the school subsystems to determine formal and informal power structures and individuals with the most potential to serve as effective partners in the research process.

BSFT therapists use tracking to identify family leaders. In addition to observing the flow of communication, therapists note how individual family members control behavior within the family. Identifying family members who are in positions of guidance is also crucial to determining power structures. This involves identifying those who serve teaching and mentoring roles within family subsystems.

These same strategies are effective in determining power structures within a school. In many school systems, powerful members of informal subsystems have the most influence in granting access to outsiders and facilitating the joining process. Thus, as in families, hierarchies in schools are not always established along the lines of formal systems of authority. School counselors, school psychologists, nurses, popular or



well-respected teachers, successful coaches, and so forth may prove to be more essential stakeholders than are individuals in traditional positions of authority (Marotta, 2002; Mayers & Schnorr, 2003). Additionally, researchers may find it useful to target individuals who are knowledgeable of and/or experienced in areas related to the research topic. For example, when conducting research on nutrition or health behaviors, the school nurse or cafeteria manager may be the most influential contact person. Also, classroom teachers who use innovative techniques and creative instructional methods may be more open to participating in research on topics that they are exposed to in their everyday work (Owens & Murphy, 2004).

During the first author's collaborative research efforts, she used tracking frequently during special scheduled meetings with the principal, school counselors, and other key school figures (e.g., coaches, nurses, and teachers) to monitor the extent to which school members appeared to understand the research aims of the study, expressed an interest in joining with her, and the nonverbal behaviors during these meetings. More specifically, some school members seemed excited about the research collaboration and expressed a genuine need for the research and interest in collaborating, whereas other school members and superintendents seemed hesitant, lacked enthusiasm, and were less able to envision how the research process and aims could be carried out successfully in their specific school. As a result of careful tracking, the researcher was able to determine when more time was needed for (a) collaborating; (b) explaining how the research could be successfully conducted; (c) summarizing how the research might benefit the school, its students, and members outside the school system; and (d) asking for input from school members.

### Mimesis

After identifying subsystems, power structures, and influential individuals, BSFT therapists continue the joining process by targeting influential family members who can be allies. For successful joining to occur, this partnership must be built upon mutual respect and trust. The BSFT model includes the use of mimesis as a strategy to build this trust. Mimesis is "a form of tracking for the purpose of joining" in which the therapist "uses the family's behavior [language] in an effort to join with the family" (Szapocznik et al., 2003, p. 29). Mimesis is an effective, culturally tailored, useful strategy in building this alliance because it displays appreciation and respect for the unique culture and voice of the family. The family begins to see the therapist as an "insider" and feels a sense of ownership in the therapeutic relationship and involvement in the therapeutic process.

Mimesis can be used to culturally tailor the research process as well. Through mimesis, researchers can effectively communicate a sense of respect and understanding of the unique culture of an individual school. In the first author's research on depression comorbid with obesity, she learned the importance of unique language in each school with which she

joined. Conversations and explanations related to the aims of the research study and research process that worked in one school did not always work in other schools. Thus, she learned to consider and adopt the specific language of each school (e.g., some schools were urban and other schools were rural). For example, we noticed that some schools adopted a more formal language, whereas other schools were more informal in their communication style and language. Each time we joined with a school, we adopted their language and communication style. By speaking the language of each specific school, the researcher validates the role of the school as a partner in the research project and demonstrates an appreciation of the values, beliefs, and concerns of the school.

Using mimesis, the researcher can present research goals and agendas in terms that are familiar and readily understood by school stakeholders (Mayers & Schnorr, 2003; Powers, 2007). The research becomes accepted as a natural integration with the mission and practices of the school, and resistance stemming from fear of the unfamiliar and scientific jargon is reduced (Owens & Murphy, 2004; Powers, 2007).

### Reframing

BSFT therapists find the use of mimesis helpful as they attempt to reframe the family's resistance to therapy and the negative interactions and behavior patterns that prevent change. In reframing, the therapist challenges the perspective from which the family approaches change and effectively presents a new, more adaptive frame of reality (Szapocznik et al., 2003). The goal of reframing is to change family members' perceptions in a way that will facilitate a change in behavior.

Similarly, reframing can work well in the context of university–school research. Reframing can help the school members and other important contributors see the research topic in a different light. For example, the first author has successfully joined with schools to conduct research on adolescent depression and obesity. To gain support for this research, the author has reframed depression and obesity in terms of being multifactorial and relevant to multiple system members (e.g., academic achievement, increased school absences, higher incidences of school bullying), factors that are germane to a range of populations across multiple contexts. Consequently, these topics (i.e., adolescent depression and obesity) are of interest to persons in multiple systems at the microsystem (students), mesosystem (family members), exosystem (school staff and faculty members), and macrosystem (policy makers) levels.

When processed correctly, reframing engenders a descriptor that will help all partners consider the problem or research topic in a different way. In other words, reframing helps the researcher obtain a buy-in from all partners. Additionally, reframing will assist the university researcher with other seminal aspects of BSFT: joining, engagement of research participants, temporarily becoming part of the school system, and adopting the school's language in an authentic way.

### Considering Cultural Contexts

BSFT therapists believe that understanding the cultural contexts (or cultural systems) in which a family exists is crucial to understanding the strengths and problems evidenced within a family. As previously mentioned, Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986) discussion of nested systems underscores the need to consider numerous contextual factors, including the family, peer systems, neighborhoods, culture, and counseling setting (Szapocznik et al., 2003).

The school is embedded in multiple contexts that should be considered in the design of culturally relevant research in the schools. Bryan, Klein, and Elias (2007) argued that most resistance to research in schools stems from attempts to apply research strategies that are incompatible with the culture of the schools. Therefore, it is crucial to consider the culture of the school, as well as relevant subcultures within the school and the broader cultural context within which the school is embedded. Successful joining cannot occur if the researcher fails to acknowledge broader contextual factors that may foster resistance and impede access to the school. In the case of the first author's research studies on obesity, she considered the resources available to adolescent students, families, schools, and counselors. In the rural areas in which the schools were located, physicians served as the provider of mental health treatments and services, in addition to serving as school and mental health counselors. Thus, primary care physicians were a part of the research team that worked with the school.

The BSFT therapist acknowledges that families enter into treatment having their own natural systemic networks, such as friends, extended family, school, and work relationships. Successful joining requires the therapist to identify factors within these existing networks that may foster or challenge resistance. Similarly, the university researcher must examine existing systemic contexts with the potential to have an impact on the joining process. Potential sources of support or resistance may include the school board, parent associations, state and local education associations, and governmental legislation. It is essential that researchers acknowledge the powerful influence of and interactions among these factors when facing resistance from school personnel. Just as these broader contextual factors may provide sources of resistance, so too can they provide support for successful joining. Using Bronfenbrenner's systems framework, the researcher must be open to establishing relationships with stakeholders beyond the school walls to form successful partnerships (Mayers & Schnorr, 2003).

### Limitations of the Proposed Best and EST Model

We believe that the described model holds promise for university researchers who are attempting to successfully join, partner, and conduct counseling-focused mental health research with K–12 schools. At the same time, however, the current model has not been tested. Thus, no claims related to

best practices (see Marotta & Watts, 2007) or its efficacy or effectiveness can be put forward. Another limitation related to the described theory-derived model may be the extent to which university researchers have a preference for and are comfortable with a systems approach to the research process. Moreover, we recognize that there are other models (e.g., action research models) from which counseling researchers may select. Counselors can add the proposed model to existing and effective helping models. We recognize that there are more similarities than differences between our proposed model and the other models reviewed earlier in this article. Thus, the use of our model over another model may be informed by the counseling researcher's preference and familiarity with the theoretical underpinnings rather than an expectation of a more effective model. However, we believe that the model we have described may have some utility in helping counseling researchers advance the research process and improve the research relationship by using a family counseling approach. Similarly, we believe that an ecological systems approach helps underscore the importance of understanding the context in which these processes take place. Because the proposed model is in the preliminary stages of development, no outcome data are currently available; this is a limitation.

### Conclusion

In the current article, we described a conceptual model—undergirded by family systems and ecological systems theories—that can be transported and applied by university researchers when conducting ethical and culturally tailored mental health research in K–12 schools. Counseling researchers as well as mental health, community, and school counselors can benefit from the described conceptual model in designing and conducting research with school systems. Through her collaboration with numerous schools over the past 5 years, the first author has found that six of the BSFT strategies proposed by Szapocznik et al. (2003; joining, clarifying relevant subsystems, tracking, mimesis, reframing, and considering cultural contexts) are particularly relevant in effectively partnering with school systems for the purpose of conducting health-related research.

We believe that the described model allows for the conduct of research with schools rather than on schools and communities. Although there are many differences among schools (e.g., rural vs. urban, public vs. private, low vs. high socioeconomic status communities), there are also similarities that may go unrecognized. The BSFT model enables a consideration of similarities and differences, strengths and limitations. BSFT flattens the hierarchy that often exists between university researchers and K–12 school members. When combined, BSFT and EST create a promising authentic conceptual model with explicit strategies that are transportable and ecologically valid for university and community researchers working with diverse K–12 schools (Crawford et al., 2009; Hooper, 2009; Owens & Murphy, 2004).

We believe that these combined systemic theories create a model or whole that is better than the sum of their unique parts.

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