

Ethical and Methodological Challenges of Implementing Social Work Survey Research in Schools: A Perspective from the Suburban United States

Introduction

Nearly half a century ago, the seminal work of Urie Bronfenbrenner recognized the importance of studying youth within the school setting, as it is the actual environment in which youth grow and develop (Bronfenbrenner, 1974). As a research setting, schools provide an ideal location to study interventions within large, diverse, and hard to reach populations, and they enable students to access program interventions otherwise not available (Mishna, Muskat, & Cook, 2012; Rasberry et al., 2017; Vukotich, Cousins & Stebbins, 2014). School-based research can provide important information to school administrators, community-based service providers, and policy makers on critical topics including health risk behaviors (e.g. smoking and substance use), bullying, sexual health, and dating violence (i.e. Flicker & Guta, 2008; Leakey, Lunde, Koga & Glanz, 2004; Smith, Boel-Studt & Cleeland, 2009). Research in schools can also encourage behavioral change in students, and provide opportunities for both students and administrators to develop a greater awareness of the school community (Mishna et al., 2012).

Social workers have a legacy of school-based social work practice and research (Flaherty & Osher, 2002; Gherardi, 2017; Phillippo & Stone, 2011). Social work education, practice, and research focuses on identifying and serving society's most vulnerable populations, which experience multiple sources of risk due to racial, ethnic, immigrant, mental health, and/or disability status (IASSW, 2014). As outlined in the National Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics (2017), the profession of social work has a mandate to further research and evaluation of evidence-based practices. Moreover, within the field of social work, there is a call for more information on prevention programs and other interventions that support healthy school environments (Mishna, et al., 2012; Powers, 2007). Given this experience, training, and mandate, social work researchers are well positioned to collaborate with schools to carry out research and engage school social workers and other support service professionals as natural partners. Yet, the social work literature is nearly silent on the challenges of implementing school-based research and the role of school social workers and other school-based professionals in these endeavors.

The purpose of this article is to examine key ethical and methodological challenges encountered by the authors in their evaluation of the efficacy of a school-based dating violence prevention curriculum in a suburban area of the United States. In outlining challenges faced by researchers conducting social work survey

research in the school setting, along with lessons learned and best practices for addressing these challenges, it is hoped that future community based survey research in schools will be more informed and inclusive.

Background of the Study

The community-based participatory research study took place over a period of three years from 2015-2018, as a partnership between a university and community based organization (CBO), who together designed the research protocol, gained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, and developed relationships with high schools. After a yearlong planning phase, the CBO implemented the intervention and the academic partner ran the evaluation. Over a period of two years, approximately 1,200 high school students in seven different schools districts participated in the study.

The CBO initiated the study by requesting the authors' assistance to evaluate the efficacy of a modified version of Safe Dates (Foshee & Langwick, 2010), a structured teen dating violence prevention curriculum, in area high schools. At that time, the CBO had existing partnerships with a few local high schools where they were already administering Safe Dates. The CBO aimed to expand the number of high schools in which they were providing this service, and thus the plan was for newly recruited high schools to become sites for the evaluation. A priority of this CBO was to develop and maintain positive and sustained working relationships with high schools, so it was incumbent upon the authors to conduct the research in a manner that promoted a sustainable working relationship among all stakeholders. The authors' ethics aligned with prioritizing the perspective, interests, and needs of community partners, and ultimately those of the students served by this CBO. Therefore, the authors' approach to this collaboration with the CBO and high schools would best be described as community-based participatory research (CBPR). In line with the goals of CBPR, the approach was directed according to the knowledge, interests, and needs of the CBO and high schools, and prioritized community ethics, capacity building, and mutual education (Caine & Mill, 2016).

Collaborative Design of the Research Protocol

During the planning phase, the academic and CBO partners collaboratively determined all aspects of the research protocol, including the study design, the survey instruments, sampling strategy, the approach to consent, and the incentive structure, which would be integral details in the IRB application to the authors' university. As the partners had different perspectives and opinions, an extensive amount of time was invested in discussing and negotiating methodological and

ethical issues. The next section describes challenges faced during the planning phase and suggestions or actions taken to address the particular challenge.

Study design

Challenge. In early discussions about the study design, the CBO and academic partners were challenged to decide among a number of different study types, including a quasi-experimental approach with treatment and control groups. While an experimental approach was attractive to the academic partner because of its inherent rigor and internal validity (Leong & Austin, 2006), the CBO was not comfortable with the idea of having a control group. The CBO did not want to implement surveys in a school without an immediate delivery of the curriculum, even in light of the authors' suggestion to delay curriculum implementation in a control group.

Solution. The partners determined that the curriculum evaluation would be best achieved through the collection of self-administered surveys conducted before, after, and six months following delivery of the curriculum. The idea of reciprocity between the CBO and school took primacy over having a "gold standard" in research design. Survey data collection was selected as a research method based on several strengths related to conducting research with adolescents in schools. Self-administered, paper-based surveys were chosen because of their efficiency over other methods, an important factor when utilizing classroom time, and since they offered privacy, which could potentially encourage more candid responses about sensitive information like dating behaviors (Leong & Austin, 2006). A longitudinal design was chosen to measure immediate changes in attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors related to dating violence as a result of the intervention, and to understand if there were lasting effects six months following completion.

Sampling strategy

Challenge. A critical next step in the participatory research process was coming to an agreement on the sampling of schools from which to collect data. In order to maintain rigor in research design, survey researchers must be careful to address potential sources of bias related to sampling, such as selection bias (Stec, 2008). In any sampling approach, care must be taken to select schools and student samples that are representative of the general population.

Solution. Achieving a representative sample in the current study was not straightforward. In order to minimize selection bias and select a diverse group of schools for conducting data collection, the academic partner first ascertained the socio-demographic makeup of the county's schools utilizing publically available

data for New York State (i.e., <https://data.nysed.gov/>), including racial and ethnic composition, percentage eligible for subsidized/free school lunch, graduation rates, and percentage of graduates who attend college. Schools that were not open to the intervention when initially contacted (i.e. private schools with abstinence-only approaches to relationship education) were omitted. The partners reviewed this information and together they selected a preliminary sample of schools that was representative of the county population.

Ethical considerations related to consent

Challenge. In working together to seek IRB approval, the partners struggled to balance the ethical issues related to consent against the realities of the context, and determine the most appropriate approach to consent for the study. Determining consent procedures involves weighing a complex series of factors to ensure that participation is maximized while guarding the rights and safety of participants. In the U.S., student minors are recognized as needing additional protections in research due to potential limitations in informed decision-making and potential coercion due to their subordinate status and classroom/school membership (NBAC, 2001). Thus, students cannot participate in research in many cases without parental consent, which can be either active or passive consent (NIH, 2018). Active consent refers to standard consent procedures that require the parent or guardian's signature so that the corresponding student can participate in research. In contrast, passive consent refers to a process in which the parent or guardian signs the consent form only if they elect to withhold consent for their child to participate (Courser, Lavrakas, Collins & Ditterline, 2009; Liu, Cox, Washburn, Croff, & Crethar, 2017). Active consent more greatly empowers parents in the consent process, however, this approach typically results in lower participation rates and tends to introduce greater demographic bias to the sample (Courser et al., 2009; Liu et al., 2017). Some argue that active parental consent may prevent access to needed interventions, and even revokes the choice to participate from minors who may possess the capacity to make a reasoned, informed decision regarding participation (Coyne, 2010; Flicker & Guta, 2008). In contrast, passive consent procedures tend to result in higher response rates, and it is argued, reduce demographic bias (Berry et al., 2011).

Solution. Active consent procedures have taken precedence amid a changing policy environment at local and federal levels in the U.S. (Courser et al., 2009; Leaky et al., 2004). IRBs have become increasingly reluctant to waive active consent and allow passive consent procedures for student surveys (Courser et al., 2009; Santelli et al., 2003). In line with the literature, the academic partner found that the university's IRB tended to require active parental consent procedures for survey research conducted in school settings. The CBO was also more comfortable with this approach based on their perception of schools' desire to safeguard parental

decision making in the consent process. Thus, the partners elected to employ active parental consent procedures in the study. Based on the literature and knowledge about the various school districts, the researchers anticipated greater difficulty in obtaining parental consents from the lower income school districts, which also contained disproportionately high numbers of students from immigrant families (Liu et al., 2017). Yet, in light of the changing political climate in the region, whereby immigrants and communities of color felt increasingly vulnerable to deportation and discriminatory treatment, the researchers felt an ethical responsibility to actively afford parents and students the ability to decide whether to opt into a survey on a sensitive topic (Negi, Roth, Held, Scott, & Boyas, 2018).

Ethical and practical considerations regarding incentives

Challenge. In determining incentive structure in the study, the value placed on engaging schools in the research protocol came in conflict with the researchers' responsibility to ensure the protection of participants' research rights. Incentives encourage wider and more diverse participation, but there are practical and ethical issues to consider when incorporating them into a study design. Researchers studying the use of incentives have found that offering some type of compensation was more effective in recruiting underrepresented students, such as students of color and those of lower socioeconomic status (Mack, Huggins, Keathley, & Sundukchi, 1998). Some investigators have found prepaid incentives are more likely to increase response rates compared to promised incentives, and that monetary incentives are more effective than material gifts and utilizing lottery systems (such as a raffle) (Singer & Kulka, 2001). Others have even suggested offering teachers or the classroom the incentive according to the number of consents collected (Leakey et al., 2004). Researchers have also opted for broad participation by developing a community advisory board with whom they collaboratively designed the consent form and outreach/incentive strategies (Leakey et al., 2004).

Solution. Determining an appropriate strategy for consents required flexibility in finding a solution to all parties' needs and perspectives. The academic partner was against providing incentives to teachers out of concern that this might encourage coercion to participate. Incentives were not used for the pre and post surveys due to cost, and in response to objections from administrators who anticipated distributing monetary incentives during school hours would cause conflict. Ultimately, the partners chose to incentivize participation in the six-month follow up survey by using a five-dollar electronic gift card from a widely available beverage chain retailer, sent via email directly to students to alleviate the aforementioned concerns. In retrospect, this study could have benefitted from employing classroom-based incentives like healthy snacks during the pre-test

phase, as research has shown that initial incentives can set expectations in studies with follow up surveys (Leaky et al., 2004).

Study Implementation

Any type of research in schools requires ample time for relationship building, mutual learning, planning, communication, and modification. It may be necessary for researchers to invest at least one to two years to cultivate relationships with schools, particularly for research encompassing multiple school districts (Alibali & Nathan, 2010). Planning time is needed to engage the participation of school leadership, complete a Memorandum of Understanding between the research institution or CBO and partnering schools, and to individualize schools' data collection approaches. Monitoring and reserving time for reflection and feedback are critical during study implementation. The next section describes challenges faced during the implementation phase of the study and suggestions or actions taken to address the challenges.

Understand and respect organizational perspective

Challenge. Before undertaking research in schools, researchers must understand schools' inherent authority and responsibility as well as their administrative structure. When relinquishing the care of their children, parents must have confidence that teachers and school administrators will act in the best interest of the children. Now more than ever, schools in the U.S. do more than educate. They are often tasked with attending to students' nourishment, after school childcare, socialization, and mental health needs. Bearing these responsibilities, school administrators assess the risks and benefits posed to their students by any programming, particularly research that takes place at the school. School administrators may be reluctant to welcome researchers for fear that research will be time consuming, burdensome for staff, and of little direct value to the school and district.

Solution. During both the engagement and data collection phases, it is necessary to invest time in building mutual understanding and a friendly relationship between researchers and the school. Relationship building must start at the top with the superintendent of schools and then focus on principals, other administrators, teachers, and staff. Some researchers see this process as building a learning community about the research subject (Vukotich et al., 2014). In this study, researchers crafted a detailed superintendent letter, which included relevant partners and intervention funding, a problem statement with current data on dating violence, goals of the study and the importance of the research, the specific research being proposed, information about ethics board approval, and a description of

school-focused incentives such as school specific data reports or resources. This letter, along with the assent/consent forms were sent to superintendents of target schools. Afterwards, the partners met directly with school administrators to explain the study, answer questions, introduce the research team, and discuss potential implications of study findings. Meetings with schools provided researchers an opportunity to understand the mission and priorities of schools, and helped researchers understand how to integrate research and school goals (Vukotich et al., 2014).

Every school is different, and much can be learned about the school context and how researchers and the school can effectively collaborate to carry out survey data collection. Close contact with schools enables researchers to gain information, including the various attitudes of administrators and teachers towards the study and research in general. The history each school has with previous research is important background information. For example, in this study one school superintendent clearly expressed to the researchers that they valued using research to inform programming within the district. However, when the researchers later met with other school administrators in the same district, they found that despite a general openness to research, there was concern about any potential fallout from the dissemination of findings from a dating violence study. This worry stemmed from parental reaction to a prior school-based survey that revealed higher than expected substance use rates at the school. This contextual information provided an opportunity for researchers to explain to school administrators how aggregate findings from all schools would be used to advance knowledge on dating violence interventions and to discuss options for school-specific data reports. In the end, the superintendent decided to make the survey available to interested parents by keeping it in a file within the school office as has been done in other studies (see Leakey et al., 2004). Thus, in the early stages of engagement, it is critical for researchers to learn about the school context and history, as well as how to best proceed in sharing findings with the community in a way that does not needlessly create problems.

Understand consent within the school context

Challenge. Researchers need to be aware of how the parents' and students' relationship with the schools affect their perception of the school sanctioned study and the consent process. The consent process and their perception of the risks associated with the study are shaped by the level of trust they have in their school, thereby assuming less risk when the school is trusted, and assessed with greater scrutiny when it is not. The deference given to school officials can be stronger for students and parents who come from cultures or countries where questioning the knowledge and authority of teachers is not customary (Wallace, 2017). This

dynamic may cause students and parents to comply with participating in a survey that is perceived to be endorsed by the school, despite reservations about participating, or alternatively elect to not complete consent forms or answer the questions fully.

Solution. It is incumbent upon researchers to ensure that parents and students are participating in research in a manner that is fully informed and fully considered. In this study, when planning with the schools the researchers needed to both be cognizant of the schools' responsibility to protect its students from harm posed by the research, while simultaneously ensuring that the school in its efforts to minimize disruption of their students' education did not compromise student's research rights. Similarly, the researchers and CBO were careful not to excessively burden the schools, placing the relationship between the CBO and schools at risk, thus jeopardizing students' access to the dating workshop and other CBO services. Although some school administrators in the study were familiar with principles on the protection of human subjects, researchers found an overwhelming majority of partner schools needed support in this area. Time was spent with school staff discussing response rates and how they posed a threat to validity and the details of human subject protections. For example, when discussing the easiest way to administer the classroom survey, an administrator reported that the plan was simply to administer the survey to all students present in the classroom on that day and to throw away the surveys of students for whom there was no consent/assent. This suggestion opened the door for an important discussion about the difference between the research perspective in protecting the rights of potential research participants and the school's focus on reducing teachers' burden.

Individualize data collection at each school

Challenge. Once a school is enrolled in the study, next steps are to schedule the intervention and data collection, determine how best to inform potential participants about the study, and distribute and collect consent forms. Although challenging, it is possible for each school to have an individualized consent and data collection plan that meets the school's needs while fitting within the overall design for data collection.

Solutions. In the planning and implementation phases with schools, it is important to maximize the involvement of all salient staff and teachers, seek their feedback and suggestions, as well as encourage their support and assistance in carrying out the planned research activities. Similarly, encourage the engagement of school social workers and other related professionals in the data collection plan. Social workers, school psychologists/counselors, special education coordinators, child welfare and attendance specialists, and other such school-based professionals

tend to be more invested in the issues and services social work researchers are examining. They also have greater insight and closer relationships with students who are more difficult to engage in research due to psychosocial or other challenges that interfere with participation.

In this study, researchers met with each school individually and determined a plan to distribute and collect consent forms and conduct surveys in the spring prior to the academic year in which data collection would take place. This advanced planning was necessary in order to take advantage of school events that would allow teachers the ability to personally distribute consent forms to parents and answer any questions about the research. It also avoided planning data collection dates that would conflict with the school district calendar including co-curricular activities, standardized testing, holiday breaks, and teacher professional development days. In terms of outreach to parents about consent, some studies report on the effectiveness of parents receiving a letter from the superintendent explaining the study and consent process, or attaching consent forms to other essential school documents, such as report cards and school enrollment documentation (Esbensen, Melde, Taylor & Peterson, 2008; Leakey et al., 2004; Stein et al., 2007). However, this study utilized other strategies cited in the literature, including encouraging teachers to distribute consents at events such as parent teacher nights, recruiting teachers in the consent collection process, having teachers give prompts and reminders to students, and providing prompts and reminders to teachers and other school officials (Esbensen, et al., 2008; Yarcheski & Mahon, 2007). The researchers worked closely with each school to develop a plan to distribute and collect consents in a manner that they thought would be most effective. To support these efforts, the research team created and distributed a “Guide to Best Practices in Survey Implementation for Teachers” that included the study purpose, ideas for distributing and collecting consent forms, and the role of teachers in the consent process.

Once individualized data collection plans are determined, they must be clearly articulated in writing. Details of the plan must include the dates of consent form distribution and collection, survey data collection dates, information about incentives, and the names and contact information for specific school and research staff responsible for necessary tasks. Specific research staff should be given the responsibility of contacting and reminding school staff as deadlines for the collection of consent forms and data collection approach. Frequent contact with school staff gives researchers time to discuss opportunities and practical challenges in carrying out data collection at individual schools, and helps to collaboratively plan to circumvent challenges.

Prior studies have incorporated the use of follow-up home telephone calls and mailings to remind parents about consent forms, but amid increasing concerns about privacy, schools no longer release students' home addresses and phone numbers to researchers (Leakey, et al., 2004). Instead, this study's research staff worked closely with teachers who were in the best position to remind interested students about consents. The research staff checked in frequently with the teachers to remind them of upcoming survey data collection dates, request class rosters, determine the proportion of students who were returning signed consents, and if necessary postpone survey data collection dates when the rate of returned consents was extremely low.

Maintain confidentiality and guard against coercion in schools

Challenge. In order for school-based surveys to take place, administrators must find a way to incorporate research into the daily activities and functions of school. As with all school-based class and group activities, teachers, administrators, and staff utilize their authority to instruct, guide, and gather students to engage within a defined timeline and in the appropriate location, and ideally, students comply with these instructions. These entirely typical conditions within a school setting restrict the free will of students and can unintentionally coerce survey participation. Within the school setting, there are also challenges to maintaining confidentiality about students' decisions to participate in survey research, particularly if surveys are administered in a group or classroom setting. When survey completion is visible by one's peers, teachers or administrators, this can apply social pressure to participate. Group survey administration also makes it easier for other students, and even teachers to glance at another's answers to the questions, which affects the validity of the survey in measuring behavior and attitudes. More critically, it violates the confidentiality of research participants.

Solution. The researchers utilized research assistants on the ground to ensure privacy and informed consent and assent, as well as proctor the self-administered survey. When research staff keep a presence in the school, they become the face of the study, and an extension of the researcher's own eyes and ears. Research staff can work closely with individual teachers to maximize response rates. They can also monitor for potential dangers of coercion or response bias (Villar, 2008). It is helpful for research staff to be on site to explain the study's purpose and significance, the rights of students as research participants, and that students' decision about participation will not affect their grades or school standing. Communicating to students that the information collected will be kept confidential can support study enrollment and ensure comfortability (Stein et al., 2007). One study maintained confidentiality about participation by distributing decoy booklets instead of surveys to students whose parents did not consent to participation

(Rasberry et al., 2017). In this study, in alignment with community-based participatory research philosophy, research assistants were chosen to reflect the diversity of the populations in which the study was taking place (Vukotich et al., 2014). During survey administration, they intervened when students had questions and ensured that students had the proper conditions to complete surveys with privacy and anonymity. For example, research assistants made sure that student desks were placed apart and reminded students to keep their eyes on their own survey. They also ensured anonymity by collecting the surveys themselves and putting them directly into a large manila envelope, which avoided the risk that teachers would have access to students' survey answers.

Response rates

Challenge. The CBO had previously administered the intervention curriculum in some of the target high schools, which established trust and facilitated these schools' enrollment in the study. However, schools with which there was no pre-existing relationship were challenging to engage and this affected the sampling strategy. For example, it was a struggle to develop a relationship with a new school with a predominantly Black and African American student population. Consequently, this student population was underrepresented in the first data collection wave. Moreover, there were unexpectedly poor response rates in a low resource school with high percentages of students living in poverty. The school conditions were such that overcrowding caused the school to implement split attendance requirements where students attended school on assigned days of the week, transportation services to the school were limited, and student dropout rates were high.

Solution. Although the research team worked very closely with teachers who went well above their duties to assist in data collection, the response rate remained abysmal at the abovementioned schools. When asked, teachers attributed the lack of response to poor communication between the student and parents, parents working at night, and low English proficiency. To counteract these challenges in later data collection waves, plans were made to oversample schools with populations of underrepresented students, and translate the consent/assent forms and survey into Spanish, which was the predominant language following English in the target school districts.

Modifications midstream

Challenge. Research staff reported their experiences collecting data at schools at weekly research team meetings, which gave the researchers the ability to continually evaluate the success of data collection, address questions or problems,

adjust research methods, and safeguard against any violations of participant rights. During the current study, a participant informed the research staff that the wording of survey questions about sexual orientation was not sufficiently inclusive of those beyond the binary of male and female. Researchers were faced with the dilemma of making no changes to the survey and potentially alienating future participants or making modifications to the survey that could affect the validity of the particular survey question.

Solution. Guided by a community based participatory research ethic (Caine & Mill, 2016) that placed value on the input of all community partners, the authors did not resist modifying the data collection plan when it did not dramatically affect rigor or value of the data. Although, researchers anticipated that changing the wording of the survey questions might affect their validity, it was determined that at this early stage in the data collection, alienating participants with improperly phrased items posed a greater threat to full engagement in the survey and to the validity of the survey data collected than editing two or three questions. Any adjustment to research methods requires careful evaluation of the impact changes would make to the overall validity of the study. However, because researchers had an ongoing relationship with the schools, which involved multiple waves of data collection, they were more amenable to modifications that were required to make study implementation more manageable for the school.

Building Collaborative Partnerships with Schools

Consider sustainability

Collaborative partnerships between researchers and schools are critical to the implementation and evaluation of best practices. Funded social work intervention research can supplement school district resources to provide needed social service supports and interventions. This work, particularly in low resource schools, which are disproportionately comprised of students of color in the U.S., needs to be done in an ethical manner that benefits and protects underrepresented students (West Stevens, 1999). Researchers tend to engage in schools just long enough to collect data, yet schools prefer sustained working relationships with researchers (Vukotich et al., 2014). Brief, short-term intervention studies can provide needed services, but they often lack the long-term planning and infrastructure support required for sustained improvement and growth in school-based social service programs (Smith & Petosa, 2016). Researchers should identify key collaborators at the school with whom they can maintain and sustain an ongoing relationship that results in an iterative and long-term process of inquiry, knowledge production, adaptation, and implementation of services and service evaluation. It is also important to share research findings through detailed oral or written reports to

school administration, brief community presentations or newsletters, and even a project website (Vukotich et al., 2014).

Incorporate school social workers and other school-based professionals

School-based social workers, psychologists, counselors, special education coordinators, child welfare and attendance specialists, and other such school-based professionals can serve as vital collaborators in social work researcher-school collaborations. They are the ones tasked with knowing and addressing the psychosocial challenges students face, and are most knowledgeable of the strengths and limitations of available social service supports. These professionals can inform the focus of study, are knowledgeable about which services would make the greatest impact, would be most likely to integrate findings into their practice, and can facilitate the adoption and institutionalization of pilot interventions. They can be written into grant proposals to support the funding and implementation of school-based research (Powers, 2007). Finally, these workers are key to sustainable research partnerships, because they may become the “champions” for interventions that are developed from the research or for future research and evaluation.

Conclusion

There are multiple ethical and methodological challenges to conducting school-based social work survey research. This study is specific to conducting school based survey research in the northeast region of the United States. Yet, the information provided may help support researchers in educational settings across different national or global contexts in developing a solid plan for survey data collection as well as collaborative, respectful, and mutually beneficial partnerships with schools. Regardless of national context, it is critical that future social work researchers everywhere, concerned with the social, mental health, and educational needs of children, are diligent in identifying relevant school-based interventions and ensuring the full participation of students in research that supports their evaluation.

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