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Best Practices for Working with Undocumented Latino Youth

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Research Question

What are evidence supported individual, group and community practices to address the needs of Latino youth experiencing mental health issues related to undocumented legal status and risk of deportation?

Need for the Project

Undocumented legal status and fear of deportation contributes to significant stress on Latino youth and their families. Findings in a study by Arbona, Overa, Rodriguez, Hagan, Linares, and Wiesner (2010) suggest that fear of deportation is the greatest contributor to acculturative stress among Latino immigrants. In a quantitative study by Brabeck and Xu (2010) over two thirds of the study participants reported that the existence of deportation policies and practices affects how the participant feels. More than half of the participants identified that these policies and practices have an impact on their ability to provide financially for their family and also how well their children feel and perform in school. These challenges make the developmental transition from childhood to adulthood particularly difficult for Latino youth by hindering the normal development of skills such as increasing independence from parents, developing autonomous identity, deepening peer relationships, and gaining financial independence (Ko & Perreira, 2010). Overall, there are serious mental health implications for undocumented Latino youth encountering blocked futures as they transition out of high school and encounter educational and occupational barriers, such as decreased opportunity for social and economic mobility. The circumstances of undocumented youth transitioning from childhood to adolescence to adulthood can be very traumatic which results in the need for mental health services that target youth who suffer from the fear of deportation (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010).

Methodology

A systematic review of literature was conducted by using search engines including: EBSCOhost, Social Service Abstracts, ProQuest Psychology Journals, PsycARTICLES and PsycINFO. Key terms included: latino youth, community mental health, anxiety reduction, undocumented, deportation, immigration, social support, support program, somatic, somatization, and school connectedness. Evidence based practices through reputable websites such as Center for Disease Control, National Institute of Mental Health, and SAMHSA's National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices were also be searched. As criteria emerged from themes in the review of literature the criteria was used to compare intervention strategies to the needs of Open Door Health Center. After reviewing the findings of the search results, recommendations were made to Open Door Health Center of evidence based practices that could be implemented to address the issue. Recommendations were based on best practices found during review of literature with consideration of what the Open Door Health Center has the capacity to implement. Faulkner and Faulkner (2009) support the stated methodology of 1) selecting keywords and search engines to search, 2) choosing articles, 3) reviewing articles and 4) organizing the search results.

Themes from Literature Review

1. Understand and Respond to Latino Values

- Understand *familialism* (family loyalty): consider individual vs. family counseling settings
- Understand *confianza* (trust and intimacy within relationships) and *respeto* (respect and mutual deference): respect the family's conceptualization of mental illness and explain counseling and treatment plan to demystify and destigmatize process and increase family understanding and participation
- Understand *personalismo* (preference for personal relationships over institutions): integrate behavioral health into primary care; actively collaborate with school staff to alleviate parental apprehension
 - Incorporate *cuento* (narrative storytelling), *dichos* (Spanish proverbs/folk wisdom), and *sanacion* (spirituality)

2. Identify/examine client's personal issues (broader social, economic, and political contexts)

- Assess level of acculturation/biculturalism and consider identity issues
 - Discuss multicultural differences
- Ask parents and youth about motivations/experiences immigrating and determine differences in family members perspectives
- Assess how legal status and history of detention and deportation effect well-being of individual members and family as a whole
- Talk to family about how parents communicate with their children about threat of deportation and make plans for how to respond in the event that family member is detained, and discuss plans (or not) with children

3. Foster resilience

- Look for/build on youth's strengths
 - Foster resilience through parental involvement
 - Foster resilience through community/school support
 - Foster resilience through positive self-concept
- Foster resilience through identifying new opportunities
 - Foster resilience through mastering language
 - Foster resilience through preparing for the future
 - Foster resilience through development of life skills

4. Create safe place for children to share fears and stories

- Incorporate relaxation exercises
- Incorporate use of sharing circles

Data/Results

Nineteen themes were identified within 20 journal articles found using the stated methodology. These themes are suggested practices for practitioners working with Latino youth and can be broken down into four broader themes as seen in the tables to the left. Many of the themes were identified as practice implications for working with Latino youth who have mental health issues in general (not specifically due to the existence of deportation) but literature identified time and time again that undocumented legal status and fear of deportation was one of the leading causes of mental health issues among Latino youth. The list of 19 themes that emerged from the literature demonstrates a combination of techniques to adapt traditional forms of treatment as well as general techniques to build upon strengths and resilience among youth from Latino culture.

Strengths and Limitations

The major strength of this research project was that the systematic review of literature revealed best practices prior to implementation and considered alternative interventions (Faulkner & Faulkner, 2009). Also, the lack of human subjects in performing the research reduced possibility of harm to human subjects. The emergence of 19 themes reveals that researchers are heading in a promising direction toward consideration of practices for this particular population, however, limitations of the study included shortage of rigorous research at this point from which to draw evidence. Specifically there was lack of visibility and participation by undocumented families represented in research due to fear of discovery. Many of the themes that emerged from the literature were found within the practice implications section of the article, but the practices were not necessarily the specific topic of research. Also, the project did not always take into account specific characteristics of the clients who will be receiving the services, potentially ignoring the values and preference of the real world clients.

Conclusions & Recommendations

The review of literature reveals the need for more clinical trials to demonstrate effectiveness of the interventions. Some of the themes that the mental health practitioners at Open Door Health Center are interested in exploring further include narrative storytelling, sharing circles, and collaborating with school staff who work with the youth. It would be very beneficial for the practitioners at ODHC to measure the effectiveness of the practices they choose to implement and publish the findings to increase the evidence base of the interventions.

References

References are available from the author upon request.

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