



## Engaging Stakeholders about the “Wicked Problem” of Educational–Behavioral Health Disparities

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Many important societal problems can be defined as “wicked” because they have multiple, complex causes, impact individuals in different ways, and do not lend themselves to simple solutions. Rather than focus on such problems as “solvable,” researchers should seek to collaborate with



the individuals most affected by the topic under study so that any (partial) solutions to identified problems can be informed by the people who would be involved in promoting, implementing, and benefiting from those solutions.

*Figure 1 Photograph from the U.S. Department of Education CC 2.0*

“This study describes our efforts to engage stakeholders in an ongoing dialogue about the “wicked problem” of educational–behavioral health disparities and work collaboratively to identify potential methods for reducing these disparities.”

By presenting a framework for promoting cooperation between researchers and stakeholders, we illustrate how systems can better incorporate the perspectives of broad audiences and, thus, improve progress on seemingly intractable issues, including behavioral health and educational disparities.

### Highlights

**Research evidence can better translate to action when it includes the individuals most affected by the problem.**

**The “wicked problem” of racial/ethnic disparities in educational placement requires collaborative problem solving of complex issues.**

Studies show that youth of color are significantly more likely than non-Latino White students to be placed in separate classroom and school settings serving youth with emotional and behavioral health problems. Such placement can limit their access to general education peers and curricula. This placement often fails to help students improve behaviorally or academically.

The current study sought to better understand stakeholder perspectives on the disparate placement of students of color in separate educational settings by asking 36 diverse stakeholders (i.e., individuals affected by or involved in influencing policies that determine student placements) from across the United States to review research and participate in focus groups and in-depth interviews. It also aimed to show how including differing points of view when addressing complex social problems (i.e., “wicked problems”) can better develop understanding of the problems and contribute towards their resolution. The focus group sessions and interviews were held between 2016 and 2017 with a state health policy group, a group of community health advocates, and a group of individuals with lived experience of mental health conditions. Stakeholders highlighted the need for supports for students, families, and school personnel; increased collaboration across agencies and systems, and accessible funding to implement these supports. Their feedback provided valuable insight to the issue of disparate school placements, while also supporting the model of this issue as a “wicked problem.”

## ***Methods***

We conducted focus groups with three different sets of stakeholders: people with lived experience of behavioral health issues, community health advocates, and policymakers. After reviewing focus group data, we interviewed stakeholders to obtain more detail about the recommendations discussed during the focus groups. Finally, we analyzed the focus group data and interviews to identify key themes describing recommendations for reducing racial/ethnic disparities in educational placement and barriers preventing the reduction of these disparities.

## **HOW DID A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE INFORM YOUR WORK?**

Although typical research efforts can narrowly focus on analyzing data and generating reports on findings, such methods can be limited in their reach and impact in the real world. In health disparities work, researchers often realize it is not enough to define and quantify existing inequities—the next step is to seek out possible solutions and connect research evidence to practice. By taking a Community Psychology perspective, we recognize that wicked problems cannot be solved without partnership and the inclusion of diverse voices—namely, those most affected by these problems. We expanded our understanding of how policymakers, community advocates, and individuals with lived experience of behavioral health conditions experienced and understood the problem of educational disproportionality, where they aligned in their recommendations, and where conflicts existed.

## Results

- Racial/ethnic disparities in educational placement represent a complex, “wicked” problem.
- Eliciting perspectives from diverse stakeholders can generate ideas for addressing wicked problems.
- Stakeholder recommendations to reduce inequity in educational placements include supporting students, families, school personnel, systems/agencies, and communities in making large-scale systematic and policy changes.

### What Does This Mean For?

**Research and Evaluation:** Study results identify promising areas for further exploration and policy change within the context of educational disparities and offer a framework for collaborative problem solving of complex issues.

**Practice:** Stakeholder recommendations may be used to inform systems change meant to address educational disparities. They may also point to the need to continue collaboration with relevant stakeholders to build a comprehensive understanding of the challenge and potential drawbacks to ideas for solutions.

**Social Action:** Social change advocates often champion the approach of “nothing about us without us.” However, research often leaves out impacted individuals when defining problems and overlooks their potential roles in bringing about needed systems change. Although unequal treatment in special education is a “wicked” problem without a simple solution, the widespread nature of this issue requires collaborative attempts for resolution. By exploring means to both share research evidence and engage diverse voices in problem solving, we can better connect stakeholders to both sides of the research-practice continuum, a promising avenue for solving racial/ethnic disparities that reaches across policy, community, and individual levels.

**Similar Settings:** Our study can also serve as a template for researchers to consider when designing collaborative qualitative research, particularly in thinking about how they might present and elicit responses and feedback and how they might interpret complex and seemingly contradictory results.

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