Parent-school and community partnerships in children’s mental Health: Networking challenges, dilemmas, and solutions.


Effective partnerships among communities, mental health services, and school are essential if services are to be more responsive to the needs of children and families, particularly those living in high-risk environments. This paper reports a qualitative investigation of the networking experiences of teachers, parents, human service professionals, and faith-based organizations involved in services for at-risk youth.

Method

The study was done in a low-income inner-city community of 2100 residents. Fourteen focus groups were conducted with parents (n=34), school representatives (n=18), service providers (n=8) and faith-based organizations (n=10). The focus group questions were designed in consultation with community stakeholders. As a result of this ‘extensive engagement process’ (p. 297) four topics were selected as the focus of the research. These were the perceived needs of neighborhood residents, communication methods typically used, parental views on parent/school communication, and recommendations for improving networking. The taped data were transcribed and analyzed separately by two researchers. Accuracy of data interpretation was checked by follow-up interviews with study participants.

Results

The majority of parents were female (91%), and African American (97%). School representatives were more likely to be male (55%) and Caucasian (61%). Four of the eight service provider participants were African-American, while eight of the ten participants from the faith-based organization were African-American.

The results of the study showed that a complex array of factors influence parent-school and community partnerships. Participants’ perceptions of community needs and of strategies for improving networking are summarized in Table 1. It is clear that there is both overlap in the issues identified by the different groups, as well as different perspectives on problems and solutions. Prior to the study, professionals had expressed concern about lack of parental involvement in schools. While schools reported many challenges in communicating with parents, parent respondents also had concerns. Parents reported often feeling that communication about their children was restricted to problems, and that schools did not consider their views. Economic factors also had important implications for communication. As an
example, while 82% of parents had telephones, only 52% had answering machines, and only 12% had computers in the home.

Table 1 Perceived Need and Recommendations for Improving Partnerships by Focus Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>Schools</th>
<th>Service Providers</th>
<th>Faith-based Organization</th>
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</table>
| Participants’ perceptions of problems/services needed. | *Transportation  
*Structured after-school especially for children with special needs  
*Tutoring services for children and homework help to enable parents to assist children | *Teenage pregnancy  
*Parenting skills  
*Language barriers and communication problems  
*Isolation of parents (e.g. transportation)  
*Parents not having information children’s schooling  
*Lack of support from parents  
*Environment (e.g. exposure of children to drugs) | *Transportation  
*Accessibility (Child care, extended hours)  
*Communication  
*Literacy | *Need for safe home environment  
*Lack of after-school provision and supervision  
*Basic needs (food, clothing, employment)  
*Support for parents (e.g. in parent school conflict) and Homework help |
| Recommendations for improving networking | *Flexible meeting times.  
*More positive approach e.g. highlight children’s’ success  
*Early communication of problems  
*Information about purpose of school assignments | *Meals with school events  
*Provide bus service  
*School events that involve children | *One-to-one contact with written back-up materials  
*Friendly attitude | *Babysitting services  
*Co-ordination of resources |

Discussion and Implications

It is evident from these data that communities face complex challenges as parents, schools, service providers, and representatives from faith-based organizations negotiate the barriers to improving the quality of life of children living in high-risk environments. The authors conclude that the enriched understanding of the concerns of different stakeholders gained through this participatory research increases the opportunities to build on successful networking strategies, and thus better meet the needs of these families.