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Establishing and maintaining successful university-school partnerships in school-based research

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There is a need for quality school-based family counseling research that leads to the development of interventions that promote the successful development of students. However, there can be many challenges for researchers who are interested in conducting school-based intervention research throughout their academic careers. One difficult, but critical, element for a successful and ongoing school-based research agenda includes having the capacity to establish and maintain a positive and productive partnership with a school and/or district. This paper provides a reflection on lessons learned from experience with a multi-year school-based mental health project in the United States. The goal is to highlight key strategies for forming lasting university-school district partnerships. Crucial mechanisms for success include transparency, flexibility, and active engagement on the part of the university researcher. Findings and implications for establishing and maintaining meaningful university-school partnerships in the future are discussed.

Key words: schools, mental health, research, partnership, school-based family counseling

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The need for mental health services

There is a need for quality school-based family counseling research that promotes the successful development of students with mental health challenges. It is widely estimated that approximately 20% of school age youth in the United States struggle with mental and behavioral health issues (Merikangas et al., 2010), yet the majority go untreated (Ghandour, Kogan, Blumberg, Jones, & Perrin, 2012). Mental health challenges can have a negative impact on school success, including academics, attendance, social skills and behavior (Brown & Conroy, 2011; Bussing et al., 2012). Youth with mental health needs who do not receive appropriate diagnosis and treatment are

therefore especially vulnerable. Research evidence that promotes effective intervention is desperately needed (Mishna, Muskat, & Cook, 2012).

Like many other organizations or agencies, schools in the US employ a host of multidisciplinary professionals with varied roles who are tasked with supporting their students. Distinctly, though, students are mandated to be present at school five days per week during the academic year. This abundant access to students (clients) make schools an ideal location to provide consistent services to students who are struggling with mental and behavioral health issues (Mishna, Muskat, & Cook, 2012; Owens & Murphy, 2004; Weist, Mellin, Chambers, Lever, Haber, & Blaber, 2012).

Research challenges in the school setting

University faculty who are interested in conducting school-based research face several challenges unique to the school setting that must be overcome in order to be effective (Mishna, Muskat, & Cook, 2012; Powers, 2007). One common challenge is change in staffing. Over time there is inevitably turn-over in school staff including teachers and administrators at the school level, and change in district-level leadership such as the superintendent (Mishna, Muskat, & Cook, 2012). These changes often require meetings to inform new staff about the research interventions and evaluations that are currently in place. It can mean providing training that had previously been offered to ensure that new staff are prepared for project implementation and research protocols. District and school-level leadership changes may also require renegotiating aspects of the project and seeking permission for continued efforts (Pincus & Friedman, 2004). Ultimately, research efforts can be slowed substantially in a district with high levels of turnover and staff transience.

Another challenge for school-based researchers in the US is the focus on test scores that has evolved over the last decade due to 'No Child Left Behind' legislation. Schedules and curriculum have been adapted to ensure that there is a primary focus on increasing the capacity of students to successfully pass End of Grade (EOG) exams (Chval, Reys, Reys, Tarr, & Chavez, 2006; Powers, 2007). This has resulted in reduced non-curricular time and activities for many schools. This can eliminate opportunities for many researchers to evaluate non-academic interventions such as those that may focus on social and emotional competencies. Given the fact that schools are assessed and held accountable for student academic performance outcomes, the focus on test-taking may also reduce their willingness or interest in non-academic interventions.

An additional barrier to successful school-based research for faculty is the reduced funding that is available to support all aspects of the development, implementation and evaluation of new interventions. The decrease in federal support makes grants more competitive, less probable, and ultimately decreases the magnitude of school-based research being conducted.

Critical elements for overcoming obstacles

One difficult, but critical element for overcoming barriers and developing a successful research agenda is having the capacity to establish and maintain positive and productive partnerships with a school and/or district (Powers, 2007). For many new researchers, this can be a difficult obstacle to overcome, especially when doctoral students graduate and so often relocate to new geographical areas in order to take a new academic position. In these situations, they likely move away from contacts and relationships they had previously established with school systems, and may find

themselves needing to start over. Developing a successful partnership with a new school or district can be challenging, but without those connections there would likely be no school-based research (Powers, 2007). The goal of this paper is to provide a reflection on lessons learned from experience with a multi-year school-based mental health project in the US. The paper will highlight key strategies for forming lasting university-school partnerships with an intent to promote the success of school-based researchers in their pursuit of developing effective programming that enhances the mental health and well-being of students and their families.

The School Based Support Program (SBSP) is a mental health intervention that was formed as a multisystem partnership between a local school district, the local management entity, and a university in the south-eastern US in 2010 (Powers, Edwards, Blackman, & Wegmann, 2013; Swick, Wegmann, Powers, & Watkins, 2015; Wegmann, Powers, & Blackman, 2013). The focus of the intervention was to bring mental health services onto elementary school campuses in a high-risk and low-resource school district. The goals of the intervention were to improve academic trajectories and long-term outcomes for students with mental health challenges and their families. In order to achieve this goal, there was a need to form a partnership that would provide a strong and long-lasting infrastructure for the intervention implementation and evaluation. The intervention is currently still in place, and the successful research partnership has lasted for six years (Powers, Swick, Sneed, & Wegmann, 2016; Swick & Powers, 2016; Swick, Wegmann, Powers, & Watkins, 2015).

Strategies and practical lessons learned for forming and maintaining partnerships

Through active collaboration, intervention implementation and program evaluation efforts throughout the multi-year SBSP, three mechanisms emerged as being the most crucial for developing and maintaining the university-district partnership. These included transparency, flexibility and active engagement. These three elements supported a strong relationship that allowed for the development, implementation, and evaluation of a school-based family counseling intervention that assisted vulnerable students and their families.

Transparency

Transparency is imperative for establishing new research partnerships as it builds trust between the multiple entities. There is a need for a set of key conversations early on while exploring a potential collaboration between researchers working in schools and school or district staff in order to set a new project up for success. With a mental health intervention such as the SBSP, the intended benefits for students and families are likely intuitive. However, it may be less intuitive and even confusing to school personnel how the researchers benefit from the potential partnership arrangement. For instance, candid conversations about how evaluation data will be leveraged into publications which support a faculty member's promotion are helpful and often novel to school personnel.

Other important aspects of transparency are any items associated with money and time involved in the research. Sharing and discussing drafts of project budgets is important. If a researcher is receiving a stipend, a course release, or summer pay, it is very helpful to explain how those work to school staff who may be unfamiliar with these processes. Having both parties actively involved with budget planning provides an opportunity to increase trust and strengthen the relationship.

Candid conversations about how much time and effort project tasks will require is also critical. School personnel are incredibly busy, and adding in more to their already full schedules is a challenge. It is helpful to negotiate overload tasks versus duty-release for school staff with administrators prior to the start of implementation. Efforts to make sure that staff have realistic ideas about how much time will be required is a worthwhile effort and builds trust.

Another good topic of conversation to have prior to the beginning of the project is how to manage any publications. It can be so helpful to talk through access to future data and how the results will be disseminated. Coming to agreement about what results will be published, where, and when can be really useful for making sure all parties have the same expectations about dissemination goals and timelines. It may be helpful to consider providing the option for school staff and administrators to not use the district or school names in publications or presentations if confidentiality is preferable.

Flexibility

In school-based research it is key for the researchers to be flexible as this is critical for maintaining established partnerships (Mishna, Muskat, & Cook, 2012). Flexibility is especially needed in meeting times and places. Schools and district offices are busy and have many demands on their time. Their work days start early and often end late when after-school meetings, sports and activities are factored in. Because staff are so busy and their roles are so varied, it can be difficult to get everyone in the same place at the same time. Flexibility can be shown by offering staff training multiple times on varied days/times in a location convenient to them in order to maximize attendance and participation (Mishna, Muskat, & Cook, 2012).

School personnel are the experts on the needs of their students. They are also acutely aware of skills and resources that they possess within their own staff and school. If a project design can be flexible, it may be helpful to include school staff in as much of the intervention and project planning as possible. They can add significantly to the intervention plan and overall success. Additionally, listening well and encouraging school staff to contribute in meaningful ways like this also promotes collaboration and will likely strengthen the partnership.

It is important to remember that there can be stark differences in both research needs and preferences between districts and even between schools within one district. For example, a researcher may prefer a randomized control design for an intervention and evaluation, but the district may want to select the highest need and risk schools to receive the new programming. This can result in substantial variability with the number of planning meetings needed, process for approvals, formality in communication and even district politics and policies. The researcher will need to be flexible and adaptable in order to maximize and maintain the partnership.

Active engagement

Being actively and extensively engaged at every stage of the intervention and partnership is another crucial element for maintaining a successful partnership (Mishna, Muskat, & Cook, 2012). Simple strategies can assist with this process, such as establishing regular staff meetings for the entire academic year for those involved in the project and attending at all times possible. The physical presence of the researcher matters as it can be an indication of commitment. Also communicating

regularly with those involved in the project by email, phone or meetings in person can strengthen relationships.

Volunteering and being available to assist schools with tasks that seem extraneous to the project is another way to be actively engaged. For example, the researcher may be asked to attend a school board meeting to provide a status update on the project. A school may experience significant staff turnover in a short time which might require additional training sessions to be offered. These are opportunities that can be leveraged into stronger relationships.

Another way to engage is to regularly solicit feedback about the intervention from all stakeholders - students, parents, teachers, administrators, and front-line staff (Owens & Murphy, 2004). This information can be used to make program modifications and improvements as needed. Interviews, focus groups, questionnaires and surveys can all be employed for this process. Adjustments can be made as needed to the intervention throughout the duration of the project, rather than only assessing at the very end. This provides the opportunity to make improvements sooner rather than later to better meet the needs of the school.

One final way to actively engage is to intentionally develop progress and outcome reports that are useful for the schools. Though the researchers may use more complex statistical analyses to measure change and evaluate results, reporting results in a manner that works well for the schools is critical. Often times reporting results in percentages, charts and graphs are well received as schools can use these in their own promotional materials (website, newsletter), or when presenting to parents.

Ultimately, the goal is to develop a relationship with a school or district that becomes a long-term partnership that is mutually beneficial (Owens & Murphy, 2004). The aim is to meaningfully collaborate in school-based research in order to improve outcomes for vulnerable students and their families. In our experience, transparency, flexibility and active engagement greatly assisted with the cultivation of a strong school-based family counseling intervention and partnership.

Connections and points of entry

Often researchers move to a new area in order to take a new position in a university. This can present a challenge if the school-based researcher does not have any connections with local schools or districts in the new area (Owens & Murphy, 2004). However, there are potential points of entry that can be explored when looking to establish a new partnership. One option is to identify other established faculty at the new university who also have an interest in school-based research. Even if the focus or topic of study is different, they may still have ideas about school-based staff within the university or the community to connect with. Additionally, exploring departments on campus that use school-based placements for their students would be a potential opportunity. Fields such as education, social work, psychology, and counseling would likely have good insights about local school systems and key staff to contact, because they regularly place students there for field placements, internships and student teaching assignments. Finally, most school districts have websites that list contact information for their personnel. Making a cold call is not always desirable as a first option, but it can be the beginning of getting the researcher connected to a school.

School-based research challenges and opportunities

Conducting school-based research is not for the faint of heart, and there will be challenges along the way (Mishna, Muskat, & Cook, 2012). Schools are such unique settings, and change seems constant. Thus long term relationships require adaptability and patience. Additionally, schools are tasked with taking on new initiatives all the time. This can lead to school staff feeling overwhelmed, which can make convincing a school to use another new intervention difficult.

However, there are also many positive opportunities involved in school-based research. In an active partnership, great relationships can be genuinely formed between the schools and the university. When a project is successful and makes a positive impact on vulnerable students, it is so rewarding and exciting to be a part of. Additionally, there is still so much to be learned from the significant results from school-based research that move us closer to learning more about what works well for students. Being able to work alongside school staff to contribute to the knowledge base on the critical issues that face vulnerable youth is a privilege.

Conclusion

There is a persistent need for more school-based family counseling research that provides guidance to practitioners and school staff about how to improve the lives of students at risk of mental health problems. Establishing meaningful and long lasting partnerships between researchers and schools can be a critical first step in meeting this demand. While it can be difficult to develop these working relationships, transparency, flexibility and active engagement can help to overcome some of the challenges embedded in school-based research.

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