Navigating the Triumphs and Tribulations of a University-Community Children's Mental Health Partnership: Reflections on the First Year as Told by Graduate Students

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Abstract

This paper describes a newly established community-based participatory research partnership that brings together professionals from several disciplines to gain greater insight into the needs of children and the families of children seeking mental health services in a community setting. This paper, written from the perspective of graduate students, outlines the successes and challenges that have accompanied the establishment of our university-community partnership. Informed by the interactive and contextual model of collaboration (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2005), this paper outlines key elements of developing and sustaining a community-based partnership and offers reflections on our personal experiences and lessons learned as graduate students within the partnership. Our examination reveals that adequate and consistent communication and the early establishment of trust and mutual respect among partners have been integral components of the emergence and success of this partnership.

In North America, 10%–20% of children are experiencing mental health difficulties (Merikangas, 2018), and 50%–75% of adult mental health disorders begin in childhood (Kessler et al., 2007; Kim-Cohen et al., 2003). The term "mental health crisis" has been used for over a decade in reference to the growing imperative to address the mental health needs of children and youth (Iyer et al., 2015). Concerns regarding insufficient service provision have been well-documented (Newhook et al., 2018; Waddell et al., 2014). There is also a pressing need for research to increase knowledge and better inform practice in this area (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2021). One promising approach to conducting relevant and community-situated mental health research involves partnerships between academic researchers and mental health service providers.

Collaborative partnerships between academic researchers and community-based professionals are not new; such relationships have added considerable value to many social science fields (Viswanathan et al., 2004). Community-based participatory research (CBPR) is an inclusive and flexible research paradigm in which university researchers collaborate with community-based organizations to meet mutual goals in a way that honors and integrates partners' varying contributions and perspectives (Collins et al., 2018). CBPR partnerships have the unique potential to foster mutual trust and respect between partners, create distinctive opportunities for promoting evidence-based practices, increase information dissemination, and improve community health (Collins et al., 2018; Tableman, 2005).

Historically, community-based research has been rooted in both action and participatory research (Collins et al., 2018; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). Researcher Kurt Lewin (1946) coined the term "action research" to refer to applied research conducted in real-world environments that integrates community involvement and effort. Lewin highlighted the importance of involving the people affected by a given issue through practical problem-solving. In "participatory research" traditions, which took root in the 1970s in Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Collins et al., 2018), researchers became active participants when engaging with local communities and encouraged continued thinking processes within these groups (Swantz, 2008).

Scholars in academia have commonly been viewed as independent operators of research (Sieber, 2008); however, according to the CBPR framework, equitable partnerships between researchers and community members can successfully address a variety of needs (Abdul-Adil et al., 2010).

Partnerships between community-based mental health clinicians and university researchers have had several positive outcomes such as increasing researchers' and clinicians' mutual understanding of and respect for the challenges that each face in their work (Garland & Brookman-Frazee, 2015). CBPR partnerships have also provided a scientific basis for improving the effectiveness of clinical programs (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2005).

Despite the growing popularity of CBPR partnerships, there is scarce research examining the potential of partnerships between community child mental health agencies and university researchers to improve quality of care and information dissemination. Given the growing and urgent need to develop effective approaches that address the mental health needs of children and youth, exploring this type of research partnership is worthwhile. Vaughn et al. (2013) conducted a review of CBPR partnerships related to child and youth health and found only 34 articles published between 1985 and 2012. Most of these articles focused on physical health, particularly on child and youth obesity, and only one of these articles specifically examined a mental health–related partnership. Lincoln et al. (2015) examined the development of a CBPR partnership to better understand the role of housing in the well-being of youth aged 18–24 who had been using mental health services. Similarly, Mance et al. (2010) described a CBPR partnership that aimed to adapt mental health interventions for adolescents and young adults. More research is needed that explores the potential of CBPR partnerships to advance knowledge and practice related to child and youth mental health.

In addition to the potential benefits of CBPR itself, involving graduate students in CBPR is becoming more common. CBPR offers participating students many advantages, such as strengthened research skills, deepened knowledge of their area of study, and opportunities for collaboration with academic professionals and community partners (George et al., 2017; O'Connor et al., 2011). Further, students participating in CBPR are offered the opportunity to connect research to social issues and may use their experiences to grow professionally, both academically and within the community (Garrison & Jaeger, 2014).

Despite the increasing involvement of graduate students in CBPR (Jaeger et al., 2014; Morin et al., 2016), the CBPR literature suggests that faculty members and graduate students who wish to pursue CBPR endeavors often lack support, and CBPR work is not yet properly valued and utilized within academia (Morin et al., 2016, Seifer et al., 2012). Moreover, data on students' experiences in CBPR partnerships vary, with data often reported by the study researchers rather than the students themselves (Garrison & Jaeger, 2014; George et al., 2017; George & Oriel, 2009; Zhang et al., 2020). Due to the lack of literature highlighting first-person graduate student voices in CBPR research, we believe that utilizing this lens may be beneficial not only for other graduate students but also for other academic, research, and community professionals.

This paper offers a unique contribution to the current literature by examining a CBPR partnership related to children's mental health. It also offers insight into the graduate student perspective: It is written by us, graduate students, sharing our subjective experiences with this CBPR partnership. Specifically, we describe the development of a CBPR partnership between University of Ottawa academic researchers, including graduate students, and members of the leadership team at Crossroads Children's Mental Health Centre (Crossroads), a children's community mental health agency in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. This article highlights the perspectives and experiences of graduate students throughout the process of developing and working within this CBPR project.

The primary goal of the University of Ottawa-Crossroads partnership is to increase the clinical and organizational utility of the data routinely collected by Crossroads staff. Optimizing data in this way will ideally allow Crossroads to identify ways to improve their services and client outcomes and will facilitate opportunities to disseminate findings from the data. This paper describes the opportunities and challenges such a partnership can present as told from our graduate student perspective. To guide the CBPR development process, we adopted the interactive and contextual model of community-university collaboration (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2005), which provides a framework for developing and sustaining the most mutually beneficial collaboration possible within a community context.

The University of Ottawa-Crossroads Children's Mental Health Centre Partnership

The current partnership includes both researchers from the University of Ottawa and staff members at Crossroads. The University of Ottawa is the largest bilingual university in the world and offers a variety of academic programs

across 10 faculties (University of Ottawa, n.d.). The university research team consists of three professors as well as current undergraduate and graduate students whose theses the professors supervise. Research team members represent both the school of psychology and the faculty of education.

Crossroads, an accredited community-based mental health agency, works with children and the families of children aged 12 years and under who experience severe emotional, behavioral, and social difficulties. The agency offers a wide range of services using Collaborative Problem Solving, an evidence-based approach to delivering supportive and collaborative child-oriented mental health services that focus on empathy, communication, and collaboration (Pollastri et al., 2019). Services provided at Crossroads include clinical therapy, intensive home-based treatment, and school-based mental health services, among others. Services are tailored to families' needs to ensure that children and their families are receiving the best possible mental health treatment.

The current partnership is collaborative, mutually beneficial, respectful, and professional. Members apply their unique perspectives toward the collective objective of making agency data more useful and accessible, with the larger goal of supporting children in the community who have mental health needs. Guided by this overarching principle, the team initially investigated the relationship between social-emotional and educational functioning in children who receive Crossroads's services. Thus far, this project has provided insight into the needs of children and families accessing Crossroads's services, and it has offered opportunities to examine related challenges in their lives (D'Agostino et al., 2019; Goldberg, 2020; Klan, 2020; Krause et al., 2020). We hope that the evolving findings from this partnership will continue to facilitate a better understanding of the links between children's mental health difficulties and their unique experiences in various contexts.

Understanding that this partnership is mutually advantageous, both partners—the university research team and the community organization—have unique objectives. From a university perspective, this partnership enables researchers, like us graduate students, to contribute to the literature on the educational and family experiences of children with mental health difficulties. It also provides us with the opportunity to learn more about populations that may otherwise be challenging to access. Partnering with agency staff who consistently collect demographic and program outcome data also reduces the time and monetary costs associated with data collection for the researchers.

From the perspective of Crossroads staff, this collaboration offers opportunities to gain a more accurate and detailed understanding of their clientele and to incorporate evidence-based decision-making into their practices. These benefits may help the agency identify ways it can change its programs to better serve clients' needs. With the assistance of researchers, Crossroads can implement more effective data collection processes for program evaluation and implementation purposes. The research team's outputs offer Crossroads staff different perspectives on their assessment processes, and these outputs can be used to better capture desirable variables and refine data collection processes more accurately. With these refinements, the goal is that collected data can be used more comprehensively for research, ultimately leading to an overall improvement of practice and service.

From the point of view of the graduate students involved in this research, the collaboration offers additional advantages. Being part of a CBPR partnership in its entirety has offered us valuable opportunities to expand our research skills and clinical knowledge. For instance, we have familiarized ourselves with a collaboration that includes multiple stakeholders, become involved in the mental health community within our city, and refined critical research skills such as data organization, problem-solving, and knowledge mobilization. This research project has also allowed us to build relationships with those in the university and community mental health contexts, creating valuable mentor-like connections both personally and professionally.

In the early stages of the partnership, both partners agreed that initial efforts should focus on better understanding the mental health and educational needs, strengths, and broad profiles of Crossroads's clientele. To this end, and after obtaining ethical approval from the University of Ottawa, the research team was granted access to anonymized Crossroads client data. This data set included standardized measures as well as program and demographic data for approximately 650 children. Upon exploring the data set, the research team then engaged in a series of meetings with Crossroads leadership staff in order to develop a deeper understanding of the measures, programs, and variables included in the data set. Following these sessions, the research team was able to

organize the data in an optimal way to meet both partners' mutual and individual goals.

Examining the Partnership Through a Conceptual Model

To explore the nature of the University of Ottawa-Crossroads partnership, this paper utilizes the interactive and contextual model of community-university collaboration (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2005). This model is used widely across the CBPR literature to depict the process of developing and sustaining university-community partnerships. As the name of the model suggests, this process is contextual in nature—that is, it is dependent upon the unique aspects of a particular partnership. We chose this model to frame our partnership because it focuses on building equal collaboration between partners and offers best practices for sustaining partnerships over time (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2005). Because both partners have drafted their goals with the hope of a long-term partnership in mind, sustaining a successful partnership will be essential. The model (Figure 1) encompasses four main phases of partnerships: (a) gaining entry into the community, (b) developing and sustaining the collaboration, (c) recognizing benefits and outcomes, and (d) recognizing potential challenges and threats. The following sections detail the theoretical underpinning of this model and how it relates to the present partnership.

Gaining Entry Into the Community

This first phase involves familiarizing oneself with the community agency of interest, generally by learning about the organization's vision, culture, clientele, and staff (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2005). In our case, the executive director of Crossroads initially contacted one of the researchers and suggested the establishment of a partnership. From there, two other University of Ottawa researchers joined the partnership based on their relevant research interests and areas of expertise, and they subsequently familiarized themselves with Crossroads's vision and culture. Once the lead research team was set, students became involved in various capacities. A memorandum of understanding was drafted, reviewed, and signed by all stakeholders. The university researchers and students also signed a confidentiality agreement in order to protect the identities of Crossroads's clients. During the academic term, the research team meets biweekly at Crossroads to discuss, plan, and delegate tasks to be carried out between meetings. Members of Crossroads's executive team typically join these meetings to provide insight and guidance. Additionally, electronic and phone communication between the research team and Crossroads's leadership team occurs between meetings.

Developing and Sustaining the Collaboration

This central portion of the partnership model includes six dynamic components that reciprocally

Figure 1. The Interactive and Contextual Model of Collaboration: The Process of Developing and Sustaining Community-University Partnerships
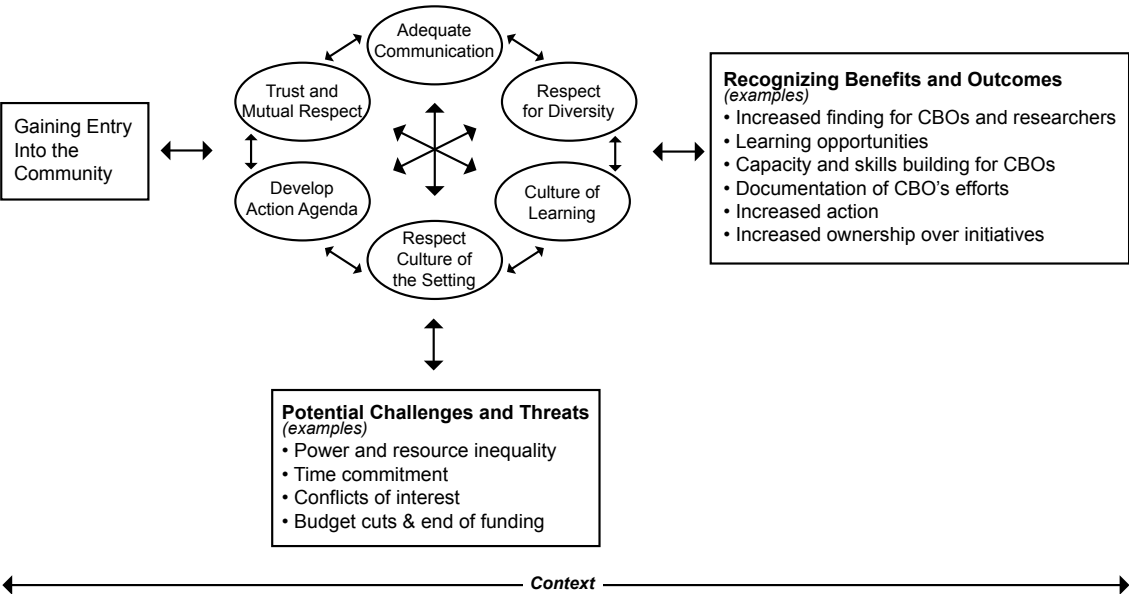
Notes. CBO stands for Community-Based Organizations
Recreated from Suarez-Balcazar et al. (2005)

influence one another. These components are not independent and mutually exclusive but rather overlapping and interconnected.

Mutual Trust and Respect

Theoretical Rationale. Developing mutual trust and respect is a central component of any successful collaboration. Christopher et al. (2008) outlined several strategies for establishing trust and respect between academic researchers and community agency staff within a partnership. Researchers are advised to acknowledge the context of the agency and each participating individual's unique expertise. An effective way of building trust is to identify resources and services that each partner can offer (Gass, 2005). For example, universities have access to academic research journals, data analysis tools, and equipment for specialized data collection, while community agencies have access to demographic data of their clients in addition to data regarding program implementation and evaluation. Although the work of establishing trust and respect occurs at the inception of the partnership (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2005), it is also ongoing in each phase of the collaboration. Once trust and respect have been solidified, the partnership can move forward with greater ease and effectiveness. As challenges inevitably arise, a foundation of trust and respect between the partners can aid in overcoming any disagreements and contextual barriers (Wright et al., 2011). Therefore, maintaining a high level of trust is critical to the success of community-university partnerships.

Example. The University of Ottawa-Crossroads partnership has been built around mutual trust and respect. Before the inception of the CBPR partnership, the two organizations had already established a trusting relationship through the university's master's programs in counseling psychology, for which Crossroads offers yearly practicum opportunities for students. One of the graduate student authors of this paper was a practicum student at Crossroads when the partnership began. This long-standing history of communication between Crossroads and the university helped facilitate a foundation of trust early in the CBPR partnership. Aside from the graduate student who was completing their practicum at Crossroads, the graduate students joined the partnership without any prior communication with agency staff. Although this was intimidating at first, the professors ensured that proper introductions were made and that the meetings were as inclusive as possible to help us build trusting relationships with Crossroads staff.

Semiregular meetings between researchers and staff help maintain this trusting, respectful relationship. Meetings are typically conducted on-site at Crossroads to facilitate access to information or resources that are unique to the agency. Furthermore, conducting the meetings at Crossroads, as opposed to asking community members to come to the university campus, signifies our dedication to working in and with the community. On-site meetings allow for face-to-face discussion between partners related to updates and any additional information required for the partnership to continue.

The solid foundation of trust and respect that was established at the partnership's inception has helped to maintain productivity and collaboration when challenges arise. For example, after examining the available data, concerns surfaced among the graduate students regarding data collection, organization, and usability. The graduate students were responsible for organizing the data in order to improve its usability for research purposes. To reach this goal, we were required to manually combine numerous data sets, identify missing information, and use excel formulas to detect human errors in this process. Due to the foundation of trust that had been built within the partnership, the graduate students felt safe bringing their concerns to the collaboration table to discuss possible solutions with the research team and community partners. This complex, ongoing data issue required problem-solving from both the researchers and community agency leaders. Although organizing the data was daunting, time-intensive, and occasionally confusing, being given this assignment demonstrated the high level of trust that both the professors and Crossroads staff have in the graduate students. Because possible solutions to our data organization concerns could be discussed collaboratively, openly, and respectfully, a reasonable solution was eventually identified.

Adequate Communication

Theoretical Rationale. Good communication within the community-university partnership is closely connected to developing mutual trust and respect. Adequate communication is essential across all phases of the partnership from early planning to developing goals and evaluating completed work (Gass, 2005). Communication is an integral piece of a successful collaboration in

two ways: (a) through the bidirectional learning of each stakeholder's specialized vocabulary and (b) through clear, consistent articulation of differing language terms and identified goals and needs.

Both the researchers and the community agency have ways of communicating that are specific to their lines of work (Sieber, 2008). For example, university researchers are often knowledgeable and fluent in specialized terminology related to data organization, analysis, and research dissemination, whereas community partners are often fluent in language specific to their own services and agency. Without addressing the differences in terminology and "jargon," confusion can arise within the collaboration. It is thus important that both university and community partners remain cognizant of their context-specific language and explain their terminology when necessary. Further, both parties will likely have different priorities and objectives regarding the collaboration. Stating these clearly early on can help to avoid future conflicts. Despite everyone's best efforts, conflicts often arise as a partnership evolves. Good communication patterns between collaboration partners are vital here as well (Gass, 2005). Using language that everyone can understand and voicing concerns and issues clearly can help to navigate conflicts.

Example. The present collaboration is characterized by high-quality communication. At the partnership's outset, clear goals and objectives—both shared and unique—were communicated during in-person meetings held at the community agency site. This was an important first step in establishing adequate communication throughout other phases of the partnership, such as the data organization and analysis stages. Even with regular on-site meetings, exchanges have not always occurred in person. For example, when uncertainty arose during the data organization process, the researchers emailed the community partners frequently with inquiries. One challenge with using electronic correspondence is that it increases the possibility of misunderstanding or misinterpreting information. Although our email correspondences have been highly productive to date, there have been occasional minor misunderstandings, likely due in part to researchers' need to become more familiar with the language specific to the services and resources that Crossroads offers. Despite these challenges, trust and respect are consistently used to navigate these communications, and any barriers that have emerged thus far have been resolved. Issues discussed over email are always revisited in our on-site meetings. For instance, a meeting was held prior to the COVID-19 pandemic in which all members of the partnership came together on-site to discuss preliminary findings, partnership progress, and future directions. Both partners were passionate about maintaining adequate communication throughout the entire collaboration process, and the partners continue to develop opportunities for strong communication. Other methods of maintaining sufficient communication that do not involve in-person attendance include virtual meetings (e.g., Zoom) and shared online information folders.

Both the professors and Crossroads have been conscientious in ensuring that the graduate students are included in these important discussions. When email correspondence has occurred exclusively between Crossroads and the professors, we have been promptly updated on the topics discussed and given opportunities to offer feedback or insight. To optimize our experience as graduate students, it may be beneficial to be included in all correspondence, both so we can be informed immediately of relevant changes and so we can observe early discussions as plans are created. Additionally, it may save the professors time in recounting information to us. Despite this small suggestion, we appreciate having such an active role in the collaboration and have observed how correspondence further strengthens the communication within the research team and within the partnership as a whole.

Developing an Action Agenda

Theoretical Rationale. While the interactive and contextual model of community-university collaboration is depicted as a cycle without a specified beginning or end point, we believe that developing trust, respect, and communication has been foundational to our partnership and has necessarily preceded the development of an action agenda (i.e., agreement on which tasks/goals the partnership will accomplish and when). It is important to ensure that both partners are clear and open about the potential uses of the data and the knowledge gained through the collaboration in both community and research contexts (Wright et al., 2011). Once an understanding has been reached, it is crucial that both partners understand the partnership to be mutually beneficial and that the goals of both partners are incorporated into the action agenda (Israel et al., 1998). This includes cocreating the initiatives of the partnership and codetermining

the roles and responsibilities of all members (Wright et al., 2011). Through transparency, communication, and the active involvement of all members, sharing of "knowledge, skills, capacity and power" will strengthen the relationship between the collaborating partners (Israel et al., 1998, p. 179; see also Baker et al., 1999).

Example. The partnership's memorandum of understanding was coconstructed by the researchers and Crossroads to ensure that both partners agreed upon the shared roles and responsibilities for this collaborative research initiative. It was collectively decided that both partners would have shared intellectual governance of the project's data and knowledge. The executive director and associate executive director of Crossroads and the partnering University of Ottawa professors strove to create mutually beneficial goals for the partnership. . For Crossroads, the partnership was designed to serve practical and evaluative purposes: The knowledge and resources gained through the project (i.e., in the assistance they received in managing and analyzing data) could help them better understand their clients' needs. This deepened understanding would inform Crossroads's decision-making, help them plan their goals, and ultimately support them in improving their services to meet the needs of their clients.

The University of Ottawa researchers extended Crossroads's goals to meet their own academic and research objectives. From this standpoint, the research team endeavored to contribute importantly to the field of children's mental health and education, particularly in advancing our understanding of the emotional, social, behavioral, and educational experiences of children and families seeking mental health services. Although the graduate students did not have an active role in the formation of the memorandum of understanding, we feel that the researchers accurately represented our specific goals for this partnership related to thesis research and opportunities for scholarly publications. It would not be possible to achieve these goals without the opportunities this partnership provides, particularly in studying phenomena and processes at individual, family, agency, and interagency levels in the real-world context of a multifaceted agency that serves a wide cross section of children and families.

Respecting Diversity

Theoretical Rationale. It is well established in the CBPR literature that diversity among collaborating partners is essential for a fruitful and sustainable partnership (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2005). Diversity can encompass a variety of differences, including behavioral practices, research interests, the ethnicity and/or culture of the collaborative partners, and individuals' roles in the collaboration process (Seifer, 2006; Williamson et al., 2016). Incorporating the previous two components of the interactive and contextual model (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2005), respecting diversity requires partners to listen to and integrate these diverse perspectives. One effective way to improve diversity within partnerships is to recruit members with differing research backgrounds or areas of expertise. In doing so, the theoretical backgrounds of the involved partners may differ, and collaboration objectives and processes will become richer and more comprehensive.

Naturally, a team with diverse members, especially those with different disciplinary lenses, may lead to differing action agendas. It is critical to acknowledge and incorporate, as effectively as possible, each member's perspectives and wishes within the collaboration (Baker et al., 1999). Compromises are inevitable as partners seek to find value in one another and devise ways of satisfying the objectives that are vital to the partnership.

Example. The University of Ottawa-Crossroads partnership strives to respect and increase the diversity in the partnership throughout all phases of the collaboration. The research team includes professionals with knowledge and experience in counseling psychology, special education, and clinical psychology as well as methodological expertise in both quantitative and qualitative methods. Further, research team members are diverse in their educational backgrounds and levels of education. For instance, the graduate students vary in their level of degree progress. The partnership began with three students in the first year of their master's program and one student in their second year. This second-year student is also completing their practicum at Crossroads, and so they come to the partnership with a unique perspective stemming from their research background and current clinical experience working at the agency. Likewise, Crossroads staff members have unique backgrounds in infant, child, and youth mental health interventions, therapy, research, and implementation science that offer important and influential perspectives to this partnership. Gender diversity also exists within the partnership; there are both self-identified females and self-identified males on the community-university team.

Although numerous aspects make this partnership diverse, it is limited in racial and ethnic diversity, as all participants are White.

This diversity among researchers and Crossroads's staff is evident within the collaboration's priorities, objectives, and processes. For example, differences emerged in discussions about how data would be used by the researchers (e.g., publications to further scientific literature) and by Crossroads (e.g., program evaluation and clinical purposes). These diverse expectations were acknowledged and respected, and ultimately both were addressed through effective and respectful communication. It is important to articulate these differing objectives so that the partnership is truly mutually beneficial.

Establishing a Culture of Learning

Theoretical Rationale. Throughout the phases of a cyclical model, a culture of learning is fundamental—that is, partners must be open to guiding and learning from each other to ensure the successful development and sustainability of the collaboration (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2005). This reciprocity, which requires trust, respect, and communication among partners, ensures that all members are viewed as equal stakeholders—an essential component of a healthy partnership (Wright et al., 2011). Additionally, it eliminates the traditional and counterproductive view that the world of academia holds advanced knowledge and power; it acknowledges that community partners possess valuable information and understandings of their own communities that are normally out of reach to academic researchers (Jacob et al., 2015). By valuing the unique expertise of each partner, partnerships can establish a learning environment that leverages each partner's strengths in complementary ways (Williamson et al., 2016). This includes the give-and-take of knowledge and resources (i.e., technology, literature, skills, experience, space) required to achieve shared goals in an efficient and meaningful manner (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2005)

Example. Within our partnership, a reciprocal process of sharing among both partners has fostered a culture of learning. The university researchers use research skills and expertise to work toward the shared goals of our partnership. As graduate students, we have spent significant time and effort merging and organizing client data provided to us by Crossroads to create a cohesive, complete, and accessible database that serves evaluative, clinical, and research purposes. During this time, we were entrenched in the client data files. We encountered certain challenges in this process, primarily due to our initial unfamiliarity with Crossroads's data collection processes and certain areas of concern within the data sets themselves. However, by communicating with Crossroads staff, we acquired the necessary skills and knowledge to move forward in our endeavors, ultimately helping to create the bridge between clinical and research perspectives. Crossroads staff have been extremely supportive while the research team has worked to gain a clear understanding of the agency's data collection processes. This open culture of learning also serves to avoid the "grab the data and run" (Sieber, 2008, p. 141) approach to research—an undesirable habit that excludes the community partner from important partnership proceedings.

In addition to helping Crossroads with data organization, the researchers are using data analysis procedures to help Crossroads answer specific questions about their clientele. For instance, the researchers have used Crossroads's data to answer clinicians' questions about the profiles of children receiving services who experience sleep problems (Crossroads, n.d.). The findings were disseminated via accessible infographics created with input from both partners. Throughout the process of creating these infographics, there were multiple learning opportunities for all members of the partnership. Crossroads staff first informed the researchers about the issues relevant to their agency and how best to present information in easily accessible and useful ways. Further, the university professors gave feedback to us, the graduate students, related to the validity of the claims and data presented in the infographics. We were then responsible for producing the infographics and giving feedback to the whole team about the tool used to collect the data and the viability of various presentations of the findings. The opportunities for learning have arguably been most notable for the graduate students: We are continuously learning important information about data organization, data usability, and foundations of research from the professors, and we are concurrently learning about key aspects of community mental health and core processes of community-based research from the partnership as a whole. The give-and-take of complementary knowledge between the partners and within the partnership has been critical to fostering a culture of learning that helps the partners meet their mutual goals.

Respecting the Culture of the Setting and the Community

Theoretical Rationale. Each community organization has a unique set of cultural features, including specific values, priorities, staff roles and responsibilities, language, the surrounding community, and the people they serve (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2005). Likewise, academic institutions also have their own cultural features that inform organization and functionality (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2005). To ensure a healthy and constructive relationship between partners, each partner must be informed about and respect the different cultures present within the partnership. This involves becoming familiar with the community organization's people and practices and acknowledging differences in partners' work settings (Williamson et al., 2016). Academic partners can achieve an understanding of the community setting by engaging in conversation and spending time at the community agency to learn common practices and experience the cultural environment (Williamson et al., 2016). While these tasks can be time-consuming, they are integral to developing an appreciation for partners' differing values, attitudes, and initiatives (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2005). This appreciation will help all partners view possible differences as complementary and beneficial to the partnership, ultimately supporting the sustainability of a cohesive team (Wright et al., 2011).

Example. The early months of our collaboration offered opportunities for all partners to develop a sense of respect that would evolve throughout the partnership. At the outset of the relationship, all participants learned eachother's names, positions, and roles within the proposed project. While meetings typically take place in the Crossroads boardroom, the research team has also had the opportunity to become familiar with other areas of the facility, such as the file room and the counseling rooms. These visits have given the researchers a deeper contextual and cultural understanding of Crossroads and its staff and clients, which has allowed us to conduct our research in a more meaningful way. This understanding has developed over many months thanks to significant efforts from both stakeholders in teaching and learning about Crossroads's functioning.

The researchers have worked diligently to keep the Crossroads partners informed about any events that take place outside of the regularly scheduled meetings. For example, a meeting was scheduled with all partners, including several members of Crossroads's leadership team, to discuss the researchers' progress over several months concerning data organization and analysis initiatives. This meeting both informed Crossroads's management and clinical staff about the researchers' activities and allowed for questions to be raised and discussed. The partners will strive to continue to create these opportunities to further develop respect among each other.

Discussion

Recognizing Benefits and Outcomes

A successful partnership can facilitate several beneficial outcomes for both community and university partners, such as increased opportunities for funding, increased learning opportunities for partners, and skill building for participants (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2005). As graduate students, we feel extremely fortunate to be included in this partnership and to partake in the valuable experiences it offers. This partnership allows us to connect with researchers and community agency staff on both professional and personal levels. At first, the idea of being part of such a momentous partnership with vital and influential goals was intimidating, but these feelings quickly dissipated with the support and guidance of each stakeholder. This partnership has allowed us to build on our skill sets and abundantly expand our research and clinical expertise, and we are able to refine our skills while working autonomously under the umbrella of the partnership. All partnership members have opportunities to disseminate the project's findings via various media and scholarly outlets, such as conference presentations (D'Agostino et al., 2019), theses (Goldberg, 2020; Klan, 2020), television interviews (CTV News Ottawa, 2020), and publications (Krause et al., 2020). We also feel very fortunate to have had the opportunity to work so closely with our academic supervisors, who are the professors on the research team. Working together on this project has offered more diverse opportunities for learning and allowed us to get to know the professors on an individual level. Being involved in this partnership has also strengthened the supervisor–graduate student relationship for each of us.

On another important and more personal note, being part of a small group of graduate students on the research team has offered space for empathy and support around the shared experience of being novice researchers. Individually, we have been experiencing our own struggles related to thesis concerns, school stress, and clinical/

education-related work, and being connected via this partnership has allowed us to experience these academic and professional milestones collectively. A common theme among the graduate students is that this opportunity has significantly elevated our master's degree experience.

The benefits of this partnership may also extend far beyond its partners. For the larger community, potential outcomes include better services for community members, increased information dissemination, and improved community health overall (Collins et al., 2018; Tableman, 2005). Within the University of Ottawa-Crossroads partnership, the partners have been fortunate to benefit from a government partnership seed grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Additionally, as outlined above, this partnership has offered skill building opportunities in communication, organization, and collaboration for both partners thus far, and this growth is expected to continue as the partnership matures.

Recognizing Potential Challenges and Threats

Although CBPR partnerships offer numerous benefits to both the partners and the larger community, they are not without potential challenges. Suarez-Balcazar and colleagues (2005) outline many issues that may arise in community-university partnerships, such as issues of power and resource inequalities, differing anticipated time commitments, conflicts of interest, budget cuts, and the ending of funding. The participants in the present partnership have, fortunately, encountered minimal challenges thus far, and any challenges that have been identified have also been rectified relatively easily. For example, as described above, our memorandum of understanding outlines that the academic researchers and Crossroads staff share governance of the project's data and knowledge, and further creating a unified action agenda has served to align the interests of all parties.

Some challenges within the context of the partnership have been unique to the graduate student position. As novel researchers and clinicians, we have experienced some minor challenges related to acquiring knowledge, developing skills, and fulfilling our role within the research partnership while simultaneously completing our education and practicum requirements. However, the supportive nature of the partnership from all parties has been a tremendous aid for us, and we have had the opportunity to thrive in each of these aspects of our current professional journey.

The actions of the partnership embody the values of equity and respect for the diverse expertise and knowledge that all partnership members bring to this endeavor. Proactive communication regarding differences or changes in the goals of the partnership continues to safeguard us from challenges.

Conclusion

Engagement between university researchers and community mental health agencies not only creates the capacity for learning and growth within the partnership context but also creates synergy for knowledge production that has the potential to greatly exceed what each partner organization could accomplish on its own. This paper aimed to identify the opportunities and obstacles that have evolved from a CBPR partnership between University of Ottawa researchers and Crossroads through the lens of the graduate students involved. The interactive and contextual model of community-university collaboration (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2005) offers a framework for prioritizing collaboration and critically reflecting on the benefits and challenges identified thus far in our partnership. This framework has been immensely helpful in guiding the development and sustainability of our partnership.

A limitation of this model may be, however, that since the components of the model are complex and interconnected, there is no clear starting point. Our partnership naturally began with building mutual trust and respect between partners as an essential foundation for moving forward together. This base then fostered open communication and facilitated mutual respect and understanding for the diverse members of the partnership and the communities in which they work. Establishing a culture of learning has occurred easily within this partnership, as both partners contribute vital information originating from different backgrounds and expertise. Furthermore, creating a mutually beneficial action agenda required attentive consideration of the partnership's goals from both the agency's and the researchers' perspectives. Consequently, the success demonstrated in the interconnected components of the model are largely due to a foundation of trust and effective communication between partners. Adequate and clear communication has been demonstrated to significantly impact the outcomes of CBPR partnerships (Williamson et al., 2016). Together with mutual trust and respect, communication has been an essential foundation of our fruitful collaboration.

This partnership offers distinct advantages for both the researchers and Crossroads. It gives Crossroads the opportunity to bring forth their ideas for research and to voice their expertise within the process. This partnership also offers the university researchers a new perspective for possible research positions and the opportunity to learn and apply information from partners who have direct experience in the community. This partnership experience has offered participating graduate students numerous opportunities to continue practicing flexibility, communication, and collaboration in our clinical and research endeavors.

For consideration in future evaluations of CBPR partnerships, our findings highlight the importance of securing mutual trust and respect between partners, including graduate students, at the inception of the collaboration. In our case, this foundation ensured a smooth transition into working together, communicating expectations, and achieving mutually beneficial outcomes . It also offered the team's graduate students numerous opportunities to expand their research skills, acquire new knowledge, and share their thoughts and opinions openly. Concurrently, ensuring proper communication between partners and within partner groups may help avoid setbacks in the CBPR process. Communication can be facilitated by setting scheduled, regular face-to-face meetings with all personnel involved; keeping all partners, including the graduate students, updated with progress through phone or electronic communications; and engaging in a continuous feedback process. It may be additionally advantageous to involve graduate students in developing the action agenda to improve communication about the expectations of their role at the outset—as well as to provide an opportunity for students to learn about creating this necessary piece of CBPR partnership foundations. Beyond these suggested benefits and outcomes, future evaluations should consider possibilities regarding career changes of any involved member of the partnership,, as well as the possible influence of the partnership on the community served.

Although there has been immense growth within the University of Ottawa-Crossroads partnership, it is still in its infancy and is therefore continuously evolving as new challenges and opportunities arise. We have helped nurture this CBPR partnership and hope for continued learning throughout its development to reach our mutual goal of improving services and outcomes for children with mental health difficulties.

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