

Commentary: Advancing Mental Health Science and Practice Through Authentic Collaboration

Howard S. Adelman and Linda Taylor
University of California, Los Angeles

As the article by Fantuzzo, McWayne, and Bulotsky (2003) indicates, it increasingly is recognized that research in the mental health field must include enhanced efforts to conduct work outside the laboratory and in collaboration with major stakeholders (e.g., Kazdin, 2000; Weisz, Huey, & Weersing, 1998). However, the full implications of bringing the rigor of the scientific method into the relatively unpredictable and uncontrollable circumstances found in the “real world” are only beginning to be appreciated.

Current initiatives for creating productive collaborations and partnerships underscore how many land mines there are along the road—especially when the intent is to intervene with “vulnerable” parties for purposes of research and/or practice. Thus, the article by Fantuzzo et al. (2003) does a service by providing a stimulus for discussion. And there are many points that warrant comment. However, these comments will focus mainly on what the authors refer to as partnerships.

Let's Talk! Toward Partnerships or a Tactic for Overcoming Resistance?

Any move to engage potential participants in a fully informed dialogue is wonderful. Indeed, from an ethical perspective, it is an essential component of a truly informed consent process (English, 1995; Taylor & Adelman, 1998) and can be a step in moving toward authentic partnerships. As Fantuzzo et al. (2003) note, however, it is hardly a sufficient step, and it can just as readily be used as

a clever tactic designed mainly to overcome resistance and curtail reactance.

Given that the intent is to develop an authentic collaboration, good practice calls for beginning with a well-conceived model for understanding what is involved and a framework for how to get there from here. Implications of efforts in this respect are still in the early stages of development (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 1999). Nevertheless, by reflecting on the article by Fantuzzo et al. (2003) and drawing on our work in these arenas, we can highlight some fundamental matters.

Authentic Collaboration

Collaborations and partnerships involve more than simply working together and are more than a process to enhance cooperation and coordination. One hallmark of authentic collaboration and partnerships is a *formal agreement* among participants to establish mechanisms and processes to accomplish *mutually desired results* (usually outcomes that would be difficult to achieve by any of the participants alone). In pursuing desired results, authentic collaborations design mechanisms and processes that (a) enable shared power, authority, decision making, and accountability; (b) weave together a set of resources (including financial and social capital); and (c) establish well-defined working relationships that connect, mobilize, and use the resources in planful and mutually beneficial ways.

Address correspondence to: Howard Adelman, Ph.D., Department of Psychology, UCLA, Box 951563, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1563; E-mail: adelman@psych.ucla.edu

Copyright 2003 by the National Association of School Psychologists, ISSN 0279-6015

Key principles. Discussions of principles related to intervention have become so diffuse that almost every guideline is called a principle. With respect to collaborative research and practice, especially with vulnerable and underrepresented populations, a principled approach certainly is needed. There is a considerable literature discussing the fundamental social philosophical concerns such interventions raise. Based on that literature, the principles that must be addressed first and foremost in developing the type of collaborations described in the article are those that reflect overlapping concerns about distributive justice (equity and fairness) and empowerment (Beauchamp, Feinberg, & Smith, 1996).

Equity is the legal facet of distributive justice. It ensures and protects individual rights and addresses inequities related to access to "goods" in life and meeting needs. Fairness is the more social philosophical application that deals with such ethical questions as: Fair for whom? Fair according to whom? Fair using what criteria and what procedures for applying the criteria? Obviously, what is fair for the society may not be fair for an individual; what is fair for one person or group may cause an inequity for another.

Equity and fairness do not guarantee empowerment. Empowerment is a multifaceted concept. In discussing power, theoreticians distinguish "power over" from "power to" and "power from." *Power over* involves explicit or implicit dominance over others and events; *power to* is seen as increased opportunities to act; *power from* implies ability to resist the power of others (see Hollander & Offermann, 1990; Riger, 1993). Riger stresses: "The concept of empowerment is sometimes used in a way that confounds a sense of efficacy or esteem (part of 'power to') with that of actual decision-making control over resources ('power over')" (p. 282). Each facet has relevance to concerns about empowerment, and it behooves us all to be specific about which facets we are discussing. In this context, a major consideration in collaborative efforts such as that described by Fantuzzo et al. (2003) is that efforts to empower previously disenfranchised stakeholders involve a redistribution of

power that increases one group's power base at the expense of others (see Adelman & Taylor, 1997).

From the perspective of collaborative research and practice, complex concerns related to the above overlapping principles arise because there are three involved parties in any intervention: the society, the intervener, and those who are identified as participants ("clients," "subjects"). Each of these is a stakeholder; each brings vested and often conflicting interests to the enterprise; each party wants to be treated equitably, fairly, and in ways that promote empowerment (Adelman & Taylor, 1994; Strupp & Hadley, 1977). The profound implications of all this have not been well-researched, especially with an eye to cost-benefit analyses.

Different stakeholders, complex compromises. The more stakeholders included in a collaboration, the greater the likelihood of encountering a wide range of perceptions, needs, desired results, and political, economic, and personal interests. Inevitably, this means extensive exploration and bargaining to work out compromises about mutually desired results and how best to work together. For researchers, the problem is complicated by the reality that many persons from "vulnerable" populations (and the practitioners who work with them) are focused mainly on improving their immediate circumstances and do not see research as serving their present interests. Moreover, minors and their parents often disagree with each other about participation in treatment and/or research. All this highlights the need to delineate the steps and processes involved in arriving at appropriate compromises (e.g., changes in the research agenda to accommodate differing perspectives) in any effort to establish authentic collaborations.

About Developing Authentic Collaboration for Effective Practice and Research

Elsewhere, we have discussed considerations, phases, and steps involved in developing collaboration (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 1999). Briefly, building an effective

collaboration involves (a) modifying existing processes to reduce “power” differentials and enable shared decision making by participating stakeholders and (b) establishing and institutionalizing mechanisms for analyzing, planning, coordinating, integrating, monitoring, evaluating, and strengthening collaborative efforts. Accomplishing all this requires mechanisms for change and providing incentives, supports, and training to enhance commitment to and capacity for moving away from the status quo. Evidence of a full commitment to authentic collaboration is seen in the adequacy of support for collaborative capacity building and ensuring the collaboration operates effectively over time by making appropriate adjustments to changing conditions.

Motivational readiness and matching motivation and capabilities. Substantive change is most likely when high levels of positive energy can be mobilized, appropriately directed, and maintained. Among the most fundamental errors related to developing effective collaboration is the tendency to set actions into motion without taking sufficient time to lay the foundation needed for preparing and mobilizing stakeholders. Thus, first concerns include how to mobilize and direct the energy of participants (e.g., family members, school and research staff) in ways that ensure readiness and commitment. Assuming adequate support for capacity building, this usually means meeting the various stakeholders “where they are at” in terms of both motivation and capability and then taking steps to enhance readiness.

As Fantuzzo et al. (2003) appreciate, enhancing readiness begins with communicating essential information to key stakeholders. In keeping with ethical concerns related to informed consent, communicating information is a required, but insufficient condition. Stakeholders must fully understand that participation is voluntary and how the accrued benefits will outweigh the costs (e.g., collaboration will be more worthwhile than maintaining the status quo). The strategies used to establish full understanding must be personalized and acces-

sible to all stakeholders. Then, the focus must be on building consensus and commitment for participation.

Readiness is an everyday concern.

As stressed above, it is essential that sufficient time be spent creating motivational readiness and building stakeholder capacity if an authentic collaboration is to be created. Once inaugurated, all collaborations require constant care and feeding. Those who initiate and steer efforts to develop collaboration must be motivated and competent to ensure ongoing maintenance and renewal. The complexity of authentic collaboration requires close monitoring of mechanisms and processes and immediate follow-up to address problems. In particular, it is essential to provide continuous, personalized guidance and support to enhance knowledge and skills and counter anxiety, frustration, and other stressors. To these ends, adequate resource support must be provided (time, space, materials, equipment) and opportunities must be available for enhancing the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of all stakeholders and generating a sense of renewed mission.

Some Lessons Learned the Hard Way

In “selling” the notion of collaboration, it is tempting to accentuate promising facets and minimize complications. For instance, in negotiating agreements, it is all too common to ask stakeholders simply to sign on the dotted line, rather than involving them in processes that lead to a comprehensive, informed commitment and an equitable sharing of power and benefits. This can lead to premature implementation, resulting in the form rather than the substance of collaboration. Authentic collaboration requires paying considerable attention to enhancing both stakeholder motivation and capability and ensuring there are appropriate supports during each building phase. It is essential to account for the fullness of the processes required to build authentic agreements, commitments, and shared decision making. This requires strategies that ensure there is a common vision and valuing of aims and that attend to relationship

building, clarification of mutual expectations and benefits, provision for rapid renegotiation of initial agreements as initial expectations become clearer and more sophisticated, and much more.

Authentic agreements require ongoing modifications that account for the intricacies and unanticipated problems that characterize efforts to effect complex changes. Informed commitment is strengthened and operationalized through negotiating and renegotiating formal agreements among various stakeholders. The process can begin with a memorandum of understanding and/or an informed consent agreement, but these documents must be subject to modification over time as participants enrich their perceptions of what constitutes personal and respective stakeholder group interests. What leads to such changes in perspective and the implications for informed consent and motivated participation are rich arenas for research.

As researchers move from the laboratory to the "real world," the value of collaborating with stakeholders increasingly will be appreciated. So will the complications of developing authentic collaborations. As illustrated above, these complications highlight important lines of needed research that have implications that go well beyond the agenda of advancing mental health science and practice. Efforts to enhance collaboration provide opportunities to enrich understanding of the effects of redistributing power, the motivational facets of eliciting formal agreements and consent, factors that affect everyday relationship building, and much more.

References

- Adelman, H. S., & Taylor, L. (1994). *On understanding intervention in psychology and education*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Adelman, H. S., & Taylor, L. (1997). Toward a scale-up model for replicating new approaches to schooling. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation, 8*, 197-230.
- Beauchamp, T. L., Feinberg, J., & Smith, J.M. (1996). *Philosophy and the human condition*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Center for Mental Health in Schools. (1999). *School-community partnerships: A guide*. Los Angeles: Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA.
- English, A. (1995). The legal framework for minor consent. Introduction. In A. English, M. Matthews, K. Estavour, C. Palamountain, & J. Yang, *State minor consent statutes: A summary* (pp. 3-7). San Francisco: National Center for Youth Law.
- Fantuzzo, J., McWayne, C., & Bulotsky, R. (2003). Forging strategic partnerships to advance mental health science and practice for vulnerable children. *School Psychology Review, 32*, 18-38.
- Hollander, E. P., & Offermann, L. R. (1990). Power and leadership in organizations: Relationships in transition. *American Psychologist, 45*, 179-189.
- Kazdin, A. E. (2000). *Psychotherapy for children and adolescents: Directions for research and practice*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Riger, S. (1993). What's wrong with empowerment. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 21*, 278-292.
- Strupp, H. H., & Hadley, S. M. (1977). A tripartite model for mental health and therapeutic outcomes with special reference to negative effects of psychotherapy. *American Psychologist, 32*, 187-196.
- Taylor, L., & Adelman, H. S. (1998). Confidentiality: Competing principles, inevitable dilemmas. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation, 9*, 267-275.
- Weisz, J. R., Huey, S. J., & Weersing, V. R. (1998). Psychotherapy outcome research with children and adolescents. In T. H. Ollendick & R. J. Prinz (Eds.), *Advances on clinical child psychology* (vol. 20, pp. 49-91). New York: Plenum.

Howard Adelman, Ph.D., is a professor of psychology and co-director of the School Mental Health Project and its Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA. His research and teaching focuses on youngsters in school settings who manifest learning, behavior, and emotional problems. In recent years, he has been involved in systemic reforms to enhance school and community efforts to address barriers to learning and enhance healthy development.

Linda Taylor, Ph.D., is co-director of the School Mental Health Project and its Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA. Previously, she served for 13 years as assistant director of the Fernald Laboratory School and Clinic at UCLA and then for 14 years worked with the Los Angeles Unified School District. Throughout her career, she has focused on a wide range of psychosocial, mental health, and educational concerns. Currently, she is involved with systemic reform initiatives designed to weave school and community efforts together more effectively to address barriers to learning and enhance healthy development.