Parents’ Experiences with an Individualized Intervention Designed to Strengthen the Family-School Partnership: The Parents in Partnership with Educators Program (PIPE)

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ABSTRACT

Mental health challenges are common among children, and can interfere with learning and adjustment to school. Although early intervention is critical and the school-family partnership plays an integral role in the development and implementation of individual education plans (IEPs), there are few supports to assist families in navigating this partnership. This study describes the experiences of parents who participated in the Parents in Partnership with Educators (PIPE) program, an individualized intervention for families who are struggling to communicate and problem-solve with schools around the mental health needs of their children. File review and semi-structured interviews were conducted for ten families. Results indicated that the program gave parents unconditional support and guidance, as well as new skills to help them communicate their perspective in a meaningful way. Parents reported feeling empowered, informed, and prepared to advocate for their children.

INTRODUCTION

Students may require personalized and tailored school supports guided by an individual education plan (IEP). Parental involvement in the development of a student’s IEP is both critical and legally mandated; however, research suggests that parent participation during IEP meetings is relatively low compared to teachers and administrators. This discrepancy between the law to involve parents and the reality of their involvement is of importance given the body of research linking parental involvement and student outcomes. There are several barriers hindering successful parent-school partnerships, such as scheduling conflicts, parental lack of knowledge about school policies and/or academic terminology, and perceived inequality on the IEP team. Poverty, educational attainment, and immigrant status also influence the degree of parental involvement. Families of low socioeconomic status (SES) and with lower levels of education have been found to participate less during IEP meetings. Parental interventions aimed at improving communication among stakeholders are lacking, and there is no literature to date specifically addressing parents with children struggling with a mental health concern. The Parents in Partnership with Educators (PIPE) program was developed in London, Ontario, Canada. This research was conducted within a community-based partnership with the director of the PIPE program from January 2018 through October 2018.

OBJECTIVES

1. Explore why parents enroll in the program and what they gain from their involvement.
2. Gain a deeper understanding of the factors that help parents improve their communications with their child’s school.

METHODS

MEASURES

De-identified parent files (n = 10) • Included all intake assessments and field notes recorded by the program representative, including information such as family history, meeting dates, and meeting attendees

Semi-structured Interviews (n = 6) • Gathered more descriptive data about parents’ experiences with the program

INTerview PARTICIPANTS

• Eight parents (100% female) from Southwestern Ontario, CA • Maximum of four children concurrently on IEPs in one family (M = 1.75, SD = 1.09) • Children ranged from 4-13 years old (64.3% male, 35.7% female; M = 8.91, SD = 3.26)

DATA ANALYSIS

File Review • Descriptive statistics from the intake notes were used to summarize participant demographics • Field notes were analyzed using a pre-set codebook

Interviews • Content analysis was employed as this process allows for the identification of central themes to emerge from the raw data

FINDINGS

FILE REVIEW

Main conflicts with the school: • A short-term misunderstanding or disagreement with the school surrounding the child’s needs (37.5%) • A long-term dispute with the school (12.5%) • A poor relationship with the current teacher (18.8%) • Concerns surrounding school transfers (18.8%) • Unknown (12.5%)

Program components: • Formal intake meeting between the parent and representative (93.8%) • Organizer/binder compiled with the parent (87.5%) • Representative attended school meeting during the parent’s presence (75%) • Follow-up meetings were not recorded in the files

IMPACTS OF PARTICIPATING IN THE PIPE PROGRAM

Overarching Themes Secondary Themes Exemplar Quote
HAVING SOMEONE “ON YOUR TEAM” Willingness and openness to attend school meetings Guidance in the form of resources

LEARNING AND HONING NEW SKILLS Organization skills (i.e., binder) Communication skills Self-confidence

PARENTS’ ROLE AS ADVOCATES Personal responsibility Stigma reduction and openness with others

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, study findings suggest that participation in the PIPE program gave parents a “second wind” and a renewed sense of confidence and hope. Results generated further knowledge on the ways in which parental role contribution influences school involvement, and illustrated the importance of encouraging self-efficacy and confidence in parents. The PIPE program objectives align closely with previous literature on parents’ views on how to make the IEP process more meaningful.

The program is relatively new and is currently being piloted with only one facilitator. It will be important to continue to evaluate it as grows.

REFERENCES


