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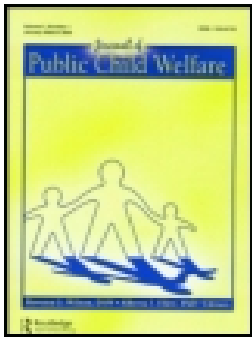
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ARTICLE



## Child protection agencies collaborating with grass-root community organizations: partnership or tokenism?

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### ABSTRACT

Cross-sector collaborations are increasingly being relied upon to improve accessibility of prevention and support services for marginalized communities reported to the child protection system. However, little is known about the feasibility, implementation, and impact of such collaborations. This study begins to address this gap by describing the challenges faced by a child protection agency and community organization who partnered to reduce the overrepresentation of Black children reported to the child protection agency through implementation of a parenting support program. Six semi-structured interviews were conducted with all members of a stakeholder committee, representing both the child protection agency and community organization. Critical race theory (CRT) informed the qualitative approach. Three major themes were identified demonstrating how the child protection agency's organizational context, lack of socio-political support and organizational culture posed significant implementation challenges for the partnership. These findings raise important considerations for cross-sector collaborations aiming to reduce overrepresentation and racial disparity within child protection systems.

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Cross-sector collaboration; child protection; community-based child welfare; overrepresentation; black families

## Introduction

Cross-sector collaborations involve the sharing of information, resources, activities, or capabilities between organizations in two or more sectors. They seek to pursue objectives that each organization on their own may be unable attain (Crosby & Bryson, 2010). The framework for collaboration is best conceptualized as occurring on a continuum of interconnectedness, representing different degrees of proximity for organizations to work together on public issues (Bryson, Crosby, & Stone, 2015; Savard, Bourque, & Lachapelle, 2015). Existing research on cross-sector collaborations within child protection has largely focused on specific problem areas: mental health, substance abuse, domestic violence, and juvenile justice. Within Quebec, these cross-sector

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collaborations usually involve health and social service networks with comparable infrastructure and resources allowing for genuine influence over the outcome of the partnership. By contrast, cross-sector collaborations between government institutions and grass-roots community organizations have been less-often explored. Such community organizations are often essential to helping reduce the social vulnerability of marginalized communities.

Barriers for Black families in utilizing public health and social services partly exist due to cultural differences manifesting in mistrust, shame and fears of being labeled (Fante-Coleman & Jackson-Best, 2020; Scott, McMillen, & Snowden, 2015). In the context of child protection, this is further amplified because of the higher stakes associated with court involvement and child removal. Implementation of more informal, culturally matched, community services, allows Black families to seek assistance in a comfortable environment without the fear of being judged. By providing services for Black families within their community, by their community, child protection systems improve their ability to offer culturally safe and competent service. Furthermore, they help support community organization's infrastructure by expanding capacity and providing streamlining of services to better address structural barriers, inequitable service access, and systemic factors that influence the child protection response (Daro & Dodge, 2009). This is particularly beneficial for Black families, whose increased exposure to poverty has been shown to influence their overrepresentation within the child protection system (Barth, 2005; Dettlaff, 2014; Fluke, Yuan, Hedderson, & Curtis, 2003). While collaboration and implementation literature has explored notions of engagement and partnership within child protection systems, this literature has not adequately explored the nuances of culturally specific partnerships addressing overrepresentation and racial disparity.

This study describes the development and implementation of a cross-sector collaboration to reduce the overrepresentation of Black children reported to a child protection agency in Montreal, Quebec. Critical race theory (CRT) was used as both a theoretical and methodological framework to capture how and in what ways the members of a stakeholder committee overseeing the partnership were collaborating. CRT examines the ways in which race and racism create hierarchy within society through maintaining racial subordination, prejudice and inequity (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Graham, Brown-Jeffy, Aronson, & Stephens, 2011; Kolivoski, Weaver, & Constance-Huggins, 2014). CRT proposes several tenets to analyze social structures, policies and practice: racism is ordinary; interest convergence; differential racialization; Whiteness as ultimate property and unique voice of color (Crenshaw, 1990; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). In the current study context, CRT was used to analyze the various relationships of power to expose the insidious applications of race and racism. Data were collected and analyzed by the principal investigator whose experiential knowledge and "unique voice of color" allowed for

shared understanding and acknowledgment of broader social contexts of oppression and structural violence with participants (Bernal, 1998; Huber, 2008). Specific attention to challenges in implementation are prioritized, in order to present solutions that disrupt the perpetuity of colonial and white supremacist “status quo”. This study and framing advance our knowledge by offering a perspective that seeks to empower racially marginalized communities while positioning the study as an emancipatory project at the forefront of community interests (Brayboy & Chin, 2019; Brayboy, Gough, Leonard, Roehl, & Solyom, 2011; Delgado, 1989). A number of recommendations for change and transformation to the child protection system are also discussed.

## Literature review

### *Community-based child welfare?*

Historically, child protection interventions have focused on targeting individual parental characteristics and behaviors. More recently, the impact of structural factors on child maltreatment and the underlying social conditions where children reside have gained attention (Coulton, Crampton, Irwin, Spilsbury, & Korbin, 2007; Dufour, Lavergne, & Ramos, 2016; Freisthler & Maguire-Jack, 2015; Molnar et al., 2016). It is increasingly being acknowledged that public expenditures directed toward community strategies might provide the greatest benefit for the expenditure (Daro & Dodge, 2009). As a result, child protection systems have been encouraged to engage with community to develop interventions that provide support to families struggling to meet their children’s needs. Building social capital within impoverished or marginalized neighborhoods and increasing accessibility to family support services is one approach to reducing child maltreatment. However, despite rhetoric of “partnership” and “community,” child protection agencies are often large bureaucracies that are separate rather than embedded in the communities they serve (Lonne, Parton, Thomson, & Harries, 2008). There is little evidence of practices by which collaboration between child protection and community has developed into meaningful participation by community actors. Given the specific characteristics of child protection mandates, participatory processes may not fit the expectations promoted in child protection work (Bilodeau, Chamberland, & White, 2002; Healy, 1998). The forensic nature of interventions coupled with the child protection agency’s responsibility for managing ensuing risks lends itself to cross-sector collaborations resembling service-coordination and cooperation with minimal redistribution of power. Coupled with the burden of their heavy mandate, collaboration with child protection organizations can encounter implementation obstacles due to inner and outer context factors (Aarons, Hurlburt, & Horwitz, 2011; Smith & Mogro-Wilson, 2007). These internal factors include organizational functioning, culture and

climate; in addition to individual worker characteristics such as attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, and perceptions. Outer factors include those external to the child protection agency such as the socio-political context, ties across systems and intra-organizational networks (Aarons et al., 2011; Einbinder, Robertson, Garcia, Vuckovic, & Patti, 2000; Garcia, Myers, Morones, Ohene, & Kim, 2020; Palinkas et al., 2014).

Arnstein (1969) distinguishes between participation as an “empty ritual” and participation from a “position of power”. Emphasizing that, without a redistribution of power, participation is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless, allowing the powerholders to claim to have considered all perspectives while really maintaining the status quo. True participation thus involves the redistribution of power among collaborating organizations to allow for shared responsibility for planning and decision-making through formalized structures. Quick and Feldman (2011) refer to these opportunities for shared planning as “inclusion”. Inclusive practices are those that entail the continuous coproduction of processes, policies, and programs to define and to address public issues. They involve the collaborative design of content and process by means of iterative discussions, rather than approaches based on narrowly defined issues or single meetings. Inclusive processes are considered necessary to help bridge differences among stakeholders, develop a shared vision, help partners establish inclusive infrastructures, and manage power imbalances (Bryson et al., 2015).

### ***Partnering with the community to reduce the overrepresentation of black families***

Several forms of cross-sector collaboration have been implemented by child protection agencies across North America to address marginalized communities, including the use of cultural brokers, the establishment of ethnic-specific services, the out-stationing of caseworkers in communities, and the creation of differential response systems. The variability of these models, coupled with the specificity of each jurisdiction and its key actors, make it very difficult to draw conclusions about whether or not these collaborations are effective in reducing overrepresentation and to link efficacy to the collaborative model. Attempting to ascertain why certain collaborations are successful, and the role community engagement plays in this process, is a difficult task. Knowing how partnerships are formed, implemented, and function becomes imperative to understanding how collaboration influences outcomes.

Research on successful reduction of overrepresentation of Black families in child protection systems through community engagement has mainly focused on legislated statewide partnerships between child protection systems and community-based organizations (Marts, Lee, McRoy, & McCroskey, 2008; Fong, Dettlaff, James, & Rodriguez, 2014). These larger-scale partnerships

attribute their success to a clearly identified government strategy including appropriate mechanisms of accountability (Fong et al., 2014). In the case of the *Texas Community Engagement Model* developed by the Center for Elimination of Disproportionality and Disparities Collaboration, the sharing of information and consultation with community members as well as processes for ensuring co-determination of decision-making and policies occurred all throughout implementation. The approach was multi-faceted, suggesting a collaboration further along the continuum of interconnectedness, including several linkages between the child protection agency and the community. These inclusive practices yield partnership where child protection agencies are held accountable through formalized structures. Effective partnerships need systems and structures to be put in place to ensure achievement of goals (Percy-Smith, 2006). These are typically prescribed in regulations and standards that ensure desirable behavior and provide for resources to minimize impacts of adverse economic or policy impacts (Das & Teng, 1998).

In comparison to the cross-sector collaborations reviewed above, the current study represents a smaller-scale initiative between a single child protection agency and community organization in Montreal, Quebec. Recognizing that these forms of collaboration may not always occur through legislation or policy, the current study provides thorough examination of collaboration at an agency level, while equally contributing to the collaboration literature through exploration of a cross-sector collaboration within a race-specific context.

## **Method**

### ***Research design***

An inductive thematic qualitative approach was used to analyze the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) under a critical race research paradigm (Bernal, 1998; Delgado, 1989) that guided both identification of themes and interpretation of findings.

### ***Study context***

In 2013, a stakeholder committee with members from a Black community organization and local child protection agency in Montreal, Quebec was formed. The community organization was founded in 2005 to help foster solidarity across sectors that influence health and wellness by advocating for access to social, educational and economic programs for Black Montrealers. The primary purpose of the stakeholder committee was to design and implement an intervention to address the overrepresentation of Black children reported to the child protection agency. A parenting support program began running in February 2015 and provided an alternative to traditional child

protection service. Parents of Black children, who were primarily being reported for concerns of physical abuse, were offered to participate in a 6-week parenting program delivered by staff from the community organization and the child protection agency. Each week was devoted to a specific theme meant to build trust between participants and public health and social services, further develop parenting skills, and familiarize participants with services available to them in their community. Upon successful completion of the program, families could expect their case to be closed.

### **Sampling**

All six members of the stakeholder committee were interviewed. The two organizations were equally represented, with the majority of participants holding management positions within their respective organization. Two participants from the community organization were consultants, hired by the community organization because of their extensive insider knowledge of the child protection agency. Both consultants were retired after having held senior management positions within the Quebec health and social service network. They were involved in the drafting of the project proposal and development of the EPF program. Only the community organization had representation from the Black community. [Table 1](#) provides a breakdown of various sociodemographic characteristics by organization.

### **Interviews and interview questions**

The interviews were conducted by the principal investigator (Author 1), who was Black and also had prior experience as a child protection worker. Interview questions were broad in scope, asking participants to share their

**Table 1.** Sociodemographic information of participants by organization.

		Community Organization (CO) (N = 3)	Child Protection Agency (CPA) (N = 3)
Gender	Female	2	1
	Male	1	2
Race	Black	1	0
	White	2	3
Years of experience within respective organization	< 5 years	1	0
	5–15 years	2	0
	>15 years	0	3
Job type	Director	1	0
	Management	0	3
	Other staff	2	0
	(i.e. consultant)		



knowledge on the development of the collaboration and to provide concrete examples of *how* the organizations were collaborating. Probing questions to elicit clarification and elaboration were used to obtain fuller descriptions of participant's experience. All interviews were conducted in person and ranged from 48 to 98 minutes in length ( $M = 70$ ); audio recordings were made with the knowledge and informed consent of the participants. Participants signed consent forms and gave permission for use of their data in scientific publication. The study received approval from university ethics committees and the child protection agency (REB: IUSMD-16-20).

### **Data analysis**

Interviews were transcribed verbatim by the principal investigator and transcripts were read several times to allow for familiarization with the data. Initial impressions and memos were noted (Patton, 2005). Semantic themes were first identified, summarized, and then interpreted to theorize the significance of their patterns and their broader meaning in relation to previous literature and CRT. Using elements of critical race *testimonios*, the research process drew on the personal experience of the principal investigator in interpreting themes and “bringing meaning” to the data within a broader social context of oppression (Bernal, 1998; Huber, 2008; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). *Testimonios* as a research method challenges dominant epistemology perpetuated by notions of white supremacy by liberating the researcher from traditional research paradigms and notions of objectivity (Huber, 2008). This method falls under more postpositivist positioning where values and subjectivities of the researcher tend to immerse more completely in participant experiences- without replacing them. Achieving balance between participant meaning and researcher interpretation relies heavily on reflexivity. While the principal investigator made sense of the information through their own lived experience and voice; words were not put into participant's mouths and the researcher maintained good awareness of self. The researcher was transparent and forthcoming and held no preconceived notions about the outcome of the study.

Two cycles of coding were conducted using NVivo 10 (QSR International). In vivo coding was used in the first cycle of coding to provide a descriptive account of the nature of the collaborative relationship. More focused coding was employed in the second cycle, using the predominant themes identified under critical race theory from the first cycle to recode the data. Achieving data saturation was made complex by the purposive nature of our sample. However, despite the small sample size, our desire to capture explicit and concrete issues allowed for code saturation within the data (Hennink, Kaiser, & Marconi, 2017).

## Results

Interview data concerning the development of the collaboration and its implementation are reported in this section. Results indicate that the development of the cross-sector collaboration stemmed from an agency director who championed the partnership and the availability of funding to support adaptation of child services to ethno-cultural minorities. Findings regarding implementation of the cross-sector collaboration revealed challenges that we've grouped under three major themes. The child protection agency's organizational context impacted by the restructuring overshadowed commitment to the partnership (Theme 1). With a lack of transformational leadership and mechanisms for holding the child protection agency accountable (Theme 2) prioritization of more pressing concerns as determined by the child protection agency took primacy. This was further propelled by a neo-colonial, white supremacist agency culture (Theme 3). The development of the collaboration and themes posing challenges to implementation are further described below.

### *Development of the cross-sector collaboration*

Participants described the development of the cross-sector collaboration stemming from an expressed commitment from the director of the child protection agency and public policy guidelines on improving service adaptation and accessibility for ethno-cultural minorities. One participant from the community organization reported the following:

\_\_\_\_\_, who was the previous [Director], has always been very open to- you know trying different things. So, I remember we met on the street here and she said "I really want to push this, you know I'm talking to [the community organization] and you know we're working on it—can you please become involved in it? (CO, Consultant).

This director was also mentioned by other study participants across both the community organization and child protection agency as adopting a strong leadership role in moving the collaboration forward. The child protection agency had a documented history of overrepresentation of Black children and families, and over the years had attempted to address the issue through various efforts to promote diversity (i.e. designated Black worker positions, trainings on cultural competency, celebration of Black History Month). It is not clear what motivated this director's call for action at this instance. The stakeholder committee's objective at this time was to brainstorm how the child protection agency could address the overrepresentation of Black children in partnership with the community organization. Partnering with community organizations to adapt child services to ethno-cultural minorities was a policy directive that had recently surfaced within health and social service mandates. A participant from the community organization reported:

At the end of this document there's a part that talks about adapting these services to First Nation Communities and ethno-cultural minorities . . . The Ministry has issued an expectation but not everybody is born knowing exactly what to do about this, in fact most people are not. It has to be figured out- there's a combination of leadership and experimentation that leads to figuring out how to do this. (CO, Consultant)

Over the span of two years, the stakeholder committee met to develop a proposal that they later submitted for funding. This resulted in the creation of ties between the organizations that had previously been non-existent. Funding required both organizations develop and implement EPF and held the child protection agency responsible for meeting deliverables. A participant from the community organization reported:

In the current context, the rules of the funding were that the child protection agency itself had to request the funding, so nominally they're kind of responsible for the project. However, in practical terms they hand off that responsibility to the community organization who is quite willing to have it (CO, Consultant).

The child protection agency and the community organization had a longstanding history of collaborating informally, but it was the availability of funding that increased the inter-connectedness between the two organizations:

Before there was really no connectedness—there was no engagement, if you needed a referral you made a referral. You know, if you encountered a situation who did you speak to? Now, on both ends we have the go-to people we have a number of people that we can speak to, we know what the challenges are and you have their cell numbers and you can pick it up anytime and we trust one another. And that I think is the big thing, I'm not saying there was a lack of trust before—because I can't speak to that, but there's certainly more enhanced collaboration and trust that goes along with what we've developed over time and the trusting of one another's roles and the roles we serve within the community (CPA, Manager).

A participant from the community organization reported:

I had never spoken to a social worker before [the partnership]. And I think another great thing about it is that it's allowed us to understand the system. Before we were getting families who show up, they have a social worker, XYZ happened and we're getting their side of it. Everything they say to us sounds crazy because their perception of it is—you know one way. Because we have a partner now within the [child protection agency] we kind of understand—they can lead us through the steps (CO, Director).

Participants viewed this funding as indicative of the child protection agency's stake in the partnership, given that they were ultimately accountable for how the funds were used throughout implementation of the parenting support program. However, while “responsible for the project,” the child protection agency delegated implementation of the program to the community organization. The community organization chose the site locations, hired staff (with the exception of one staff member loaned by the child protection agency),

purchased program materials, and transported the clientele, among other tasks. There was recognition on the part of the child protection agency that the community organization held a certain expertise in program implementation. Participants from the child protection agency stated the following:

The community organization is the expert and we need to leave them to do what they need to do. The only area that I would feel I would need to intervene is if [the community organization] communicated to me that my own staff was inappropriate, then certainly then I would be dealing with that. (CPA, Manager)

They've [the community organization] taken a big lead in this even though we've provided our support with a child care worker. In terms of the pamphlets, organizing, getting the word out, dealing with the logistics it's really been all them. But we share [tasks] in terms of the financial logistics. (CPA, Manager)

The decision to delegate implementation of logistics to the community organization placed the child protection agency in the position of having to authorize funds used by the community organization. The community organization would invoice the child protection agency and wait for reimbursement of expenses already paid. Only sharing tasks related to "financial logistics" meant that much of the stakeholder meetings were bureaucratic, with little discussion for program innovation.

### ***Challenges to implementation***

Although it was anticipated that referrals from the child protection agency would exceed the capacity of the parenting support program, of the 93 children referred to EPF, only 54% came from the child protection agency. The remaining referrals came from school boards and other nonprofit organizations with whom the community organization had preexisting ties. While these children were considered at-risk of maltreatment, the child protection agency was not currently involved in these cases. Additionally, it was expected that each program session would help six to ten families, but even with referrals from outside the child protection agency, the program was only attended by an average of five families per session. Participants from the study mentioned the child protection agency's organizational context, socio-political support, and organizational culture as the principal reasons for the partnership's poor recruitment and referral of Black families from within the child protection agency.

### ***Organizational context***

Prior to the start of program implementation, the child protection agency had been merged with several other public health and social service institutions. This merger resulted in significant cuts to senior personnel and the transfer of managers into new positions carrying larger responsibilities. This challenging

organizational context was a recurrent theme among participants and was described as a major challenge to implementation efforts. A participant from the community organization reported the following:

[The child protection agency] got merged into an organization that was probably roughly ten times their size, approximately. So instead of being one fairly big organization it goes inside something that is ten times the size of what it was, and it is the only organization with their particular mandate. All the rest of this new organization has got other mandates in health, intellectual handicap, mental health, the elderly and so on. So, it goes from being a fairly big fish to being a small fish in a much bigger pond. (CO, Consultant)

The merger meant that the child protection agency had to learn how to navigate their services under a new administrative infrastructure. Because the funding had been granted to the child protection agency, the community organization was dependent on the release of funds by the agency to implement the program. After having fronted the costs for the first session of program, the community organization only received their reimbursement for the associated costs nine months later. This posed a major problem for the community organization, which did not have the ability to self-finance over such an extended period of time. Probing into the reasons for the delay in funding, significant time and effort were required on the part of the child protection agency to locate the funds within their now larger organization. In the end, the delayed funding was not a result of a lack of funds; rather, according to a participant from the child protection agency:

The money was there, we just couldn't access it. So, we needed to find out where that money was—and it was just sitting there (CPA, Manager).

Another participant from the child protection agency added:

Now that we're a bigger organization, the accessibility of getting the funding, once we get the funding and deposit it within our organization, seems to be—there seems to be a bit more of umm—structure you have to go through. More red tape, more people, more explanations. (CPA, Manager)

The delays in funding resulted in the community organization halting the program until they could guarantee that the child protection agency would provide funds prior to the start of each program session. All of the initial excitement and promotion surrounding the parenting support program had dissipated when it relaunched several months later. A participant from the community organization stated:

We had to start over—under different conditions that were made more difficult because of the merger (CO, Director).

In addition to challenges because of funding delays and stunted momentum, participants from the community organization described the organizational

context as significantly impacting the child protection agency's ability to effectively promote the program, within their services, to allow for effective participation of the target clientele. A participant from the child protection agency reported:

Ironically, we're getting more referrals from the community than we are from our own internal [agency] which for me, is very disturbing (CPA, Manager).

The community organization believed that this lack of response from the child protection agency was because they were "distracted" by the merger:

It seems to me that they just kind of stopped paying attention to [the community organization] not because they decided it's not important anymore but because the demands of the re-organization just swamped many things—including that (CO, Consultant).

The demands of restructuring resulted in the parenting support program not receiving the attention and promotion required to obtain referrals from caseworkers. In fact, the program appeared to lack visibility within the agency. One participant from the community organization believed that some caseworkers could be completely unaware of the programme's existence:

You know, it wouldn't surprise me if there are managers inside of the child protection agency responsible for staff who have caseloads for which there are Black families who would either say: "I've never heard of it [the program]" or "I didn't think that we could use it" or "I don't know how to use it" or "It didn't occur to me" (CO, Consultant).

According to participants from the child protection agency, it was not enough to simply send a mass e-mail advertising the program or to hang a poster in the building. Caseworkers are bombarded by heavy caseloads and information, so outreach for these types of initiatives must be personalized, regular, consistent and routine. Agency members from the stakeholder committee were expected to disseminate program information within their respective divisions. These members held positions in upper management and were tasked with ensuring that lower level management and caseworkers were able to access program information and make referrals. However, not every division within the child protection agency was represented at the stakeholder committee, and several participants commented that the committee was missing members and adequate representation. To compensate, the community organization was granted access to management in various key divisions outside those represented within the stakeholder committee, to boost referrals from the agency. While the community organization willingly accepted this task, they expressed concerns about why the information could not be relayed directly by agency committee members, given their equal stake in the collaboration. One participant from the community organization reported the following:

So, they'll tell me who I'm supposed to talk to and then I do it. So, I don't know if it's because they can't do it? I feel like there are these barriers— these silos that they work within (CO, Director).

This participant described being given contact information from an agency member of the stakeholder committee on how to reach a manager from another department. It was unclear why the stakeholder agency member was unable to give the information directly to the other department and why the community organization had to act as a go-between:

If it's a [child protection agency] project why doesn't everybody in the agency know about it? It seems that it's not as simple as telling everybody in the agency. It's like there's a process. To me, if you're partnering in a project with someone and this is your project everyone in your ranks should know about it and everybody should be using it (CO, Director).

Poor recruitment from the child protection agency meant that referrals from outside sources were necessary. Funds that were unused by the partnership risked being returned to the funder by the end of the fiscal year. The recruitment of families beyond the child protection agency was delegated to the community organization. These outreach efforts were not funded and required a significant amount of investment on the part of the community organization:

There've been periods where [the community organization] didn't have any child protection referrals and had to go out and beat the bushes. [We] had to go to sister organizations, [we] had to look among the people that come to [us] for help about different things, and [we] had to go to school partners. So [we] had some sessions where there were zero child protection cases involved, but if [we] didn't do that [we] were at risk of not using the funding. (CO, Consultant)

The lack of referrals from the child protection agency and significant deviation from the target population raised significant concerns from the community organization about the sustainability of the partnership and whether future funding could be secured, given the relatively low involvement of families from the child protection agency.

### ***Socio-political support***

While the lack of visibility and promotion of the program may have been the primary reason for poor recruitment and low referrals, there was also a concern that the partnership lacked support from the agency:

Look how hard it is to just have a meeting with [the child protection agency]. We were supposed to meet like two months ago or something and it's always postponed. Now it's again postponed so that's too bad because of the re-organization and other priorities (CO, Consultant).

The stakeholder committee was expected to meet at the beginning and end of each of the six-week program sessions. Following the restructuring, four or

five months went by between meetings. All participants described the stakeholder committee meetings as indispensable. These meetings provided a space for communication, negotiation, brainstorming, and strategic planning. A manager from the child protection agency described the committee as the “over-seer of the partnership,” while a participant from the community organization stated:

I think that the stakeholder committee is essential; if you’re going to be in a partnership this is a huge demonstration of what a partnership is, when everyone gets together and discusses where we are, where we want to go. (CO, Director).

Activities stemming from the collaboration were dependent on the child protection agency’s capacity to partner with the community organization and to participate in these meetings. While the child protection agency continued to express desire and commitment to the partnership and its activities, their actions did not always fit with this rhetoric. A participant from the community organization stated the following:

I believe that if you were to go and ask any of those people [child protection agency staff] “is this important?” they would tell you categorically that it’s important. Nobody in their right mind would say it’s not. So the problem is the behaviour that flows from that (CO, Consultant).

The restructuring revealed that the partnership and parenting support program were not prioritized within the restructured organization. This was demonstrated by the lack of meetings for several months and poor referral response from agency staff. For an extended period of time, the community organization had no real access to the agency. When committee meetings resumed, they were task-focused, given the outstanding demands related to implementation of the parenting support program. The stakeholder committee was consumed with troubleshooting the fallout from restructuring that they were unable to plan, evaluate, and reflect on their partnership in a meaningful manner.

There are several objectives [in the partnership] that we try to get back to, but like I said before, I feel the day-to-day challenges are kind of taking over. I feel that we have to kind of keep them in mind and continue to work on that (CO, Consultant).

At the onset of the partnership, collaboration between both organizations was also meant to address larger concerns beyond the implementation of the parenting support program, such as how to increase the accessibility of services to the Black community and how to build awareness among professionals of services available to Black families within their community.

My hope is that as we move forward that we’ll be able to develop other partnerships or other projects with this group [the community organization]. There’s a number of



groups or communities or projects that can be had [that] either they've identified or we can play a role or help support or whatever the case may be. You know and I hope that this type of orientation that we've taken opens it up for other communities that we can be involved with (CPA, Manager).

Despite desire from the child protection agency to form partnerships with other ethno-cultural communities, corresponding action on the part of the agency to attain these objectives was missing. The child protection agency's inability to fully attend to the needs of the current partnership, made time for strategic planning into other communities difficult. There was a sense that activities stemming from the partnership would not be possible without clear policy directives to enforce agreements and hold the child protection agency accountable. According to one participant from the community organization it is not enough to simply produce policy guidelines on improving service adaptation and accessibility for ethno-cultural minorities, actions and accountability mechanisms must be specified to support these initiatives. Child protection agencies then need to demonstrate how they are going to achieve their directives.

If [policy document] doesn't say, describe examples of adaptation of services to ethno-cultural minorities and if it doesn't say, describe examples of collaborations with community organizations that come from ethno-cultural minorities. It might get done but if it's not called for, it won't— it's certainly not guaranteed to get done because there are so many other things to attend to (CPA, Manager).

The reality is that child protection agencies are faced with many demands concerning a variety of vulnerable groups and social issues. For a particular cause to become prioritized, good intentions are not enough.

The socio-political challenges faced by the partnership were also attributed to personnel drift within the child protection agency. The presence of “champions” or “leaders” is frequently referenced in collaboration literature. These individuals are often responsible for motivating change within their organization and possess personal characteristics that support mobilization activities. Within the child protection agency, two senior managers who played significant roles during the start of the partnership retired from the agency prior to the implementation of the parenting support program. These managers had approached the community organization and had requested their help in reducing overrepresentation. They invested two years of networking with the community organization to plan and develop the program project proposal. While not all of the participants from the community organization suggested that their departure negatively impacted the partnership, one participant reported the following:

Different people change and a significant person left. [Previous stakeholder member] seemed to have quite a strong leadership role and she wasn't really replaced. (CPA, Manager).

Additionally, a participant from the child protection agency used telling words to describe their involvement in the collaboration:

I'm a member of the stakeholder committee and inherited the membership from [name of manager] who was one of the individuals who initiated the project for the agency with the community and this was a dossier that I inherited from her after she retired (CPA, Manager).

The use of the word “inherited” and “dossier” places the participant’s involvement in the collaboration at the same level as other day-to-day tasks and responsibilities. In a context void of mechanisms to enforce collaboration activities, a “dossier” becomes one competing priority among many. Under such circumstances, the personal investment necessary to motivate others and champion a partnership is questionable. This lack of investment was also demonstrated when another participant from the child protection agency confused the given acronym of the parenting support program with that of a completely different program. When asked to further describe their knowledge of the community organization, they stated:

We've partnered with, and I never get the acronym right. They do good work with regard to community program. I don't know detailed knowledge about them. I haven't done a big homework with it because I've really mostly tried to focus on [the parenting support program]. (CPA, Manager).

This particular participant struggled with articulating the general mandate and mission of the community organization outside of their involvement in the parenting support program. Entering in a partnership with an organization requires knowledge of their mission and mandate. While knowledge transfer occurred from the child protection agency to the community organization with regards to the child protection process and policies, similar transfer of knowledge from the community organization to the child protection agency was not reciprocated. The ability to promote a partnership is questionable if an organization is unable to market their partner.

The departure of the previous “champions” within the child protection agency seemed to shift the balance in ownership of the partnership. While not directly stated by those interviewed, it seemed that in spite of each organization claiming to have an equal stake in the collaboration, it was the child protection agency that dictated the “partnership”. The child protection agency did a lot of delegating to the community organization under the pretense that they were the “experts.” The term “experts” was used several times by participants from the child protection agency:

My sense with regards to this is that they're the experts—this community organization is the expert and we need to leave them to do what they need to do (CPA, Manager).

This statement alludes to the child protection agency “auto-piloting” the partnership. They determined the terms of their involvement and what they were willing

or not willing to contribute, while the community organization attempted to adjust and accommodate the agency. The community organization's frustration with the child protection agency also went unspoken. They gave the agency the benefit of the doubt because of the restructuring and never held them accountable for their lack of participation. This organizational etiquette may have been required, given the "honeymoon phase" of the collaboration, or could be the symptom of something more pervasive that would continue to hinder communication moving forward. The claim that each partner had an "equal stake" in the collaboration was inaccurate, given that the community organization had more to lose. A participant from the community organization stated:

There's a lot of weight that comes with being in a partnership with such an agency. I wasn't aware that it was important, but I sit on a couple of tables and committees in different neighborhoods and "Ooh you're in a partnership with [child protection agency name]?" it lends some type of credibility to our little organization that we wouldn't ordinarily have had (CO, Director).

The partnership with the child protection agency allowed the community organization to garner credibility with other government institutions, increasing the likelihood of future initiatives or collaborations.

### *Organizational culture*

The challenging organizational culture of the child protection agency was acknowledged by participants from both the community organization and the agency as being partly responsible for the lack of referrals. A participant from the child protection agency reported the following:

[Child protection agency] thinks we have the final say and we're God and we're going to do everything—we don't go enough towards community partners and we don't think about it. And yet, at the same time we complain. We complain that the work is too much but then we don't reach out to the very people that want to help and connect our families to them (CPA, Manager).

The suggestion that working in partnership with communities is not intuitive to caseworkers was one reason expressed for the lack of referrals from the agency. This participant suggested that even if adequate promotion of the partnership and the parenting support program had occurred, caseworkers would still be reluctant to refer families. Another participant from the child protection agency added:

We have workers that say they are exhausted about being the sole keeper of a lot of these dossiers. Yet on the other hand if you've asked them if they've referred to any of these community resources, there seems to be a reluctance to partner with community resources—because there seems to be a sense of "I'm going to lose control of my case," and there's a sense of "I'm not sure if I want to share the work." I'm not sure what that's about—so it's really around changing the culture in people to say that this is a program that can complement already what you're doing. And so that's what we're trying to do.

Recruitment is hard when you have a culture that is not conducive to working with partnerships external to their agency (CPA, Manager).

Beyond an agency culture that appeared to struggle with partnering with community organizations, one participant from the community organization described the agency's organizational culture not being conducive to supporting diversity efforts:

Instilling in an organization behaviour that is completely commensurate with respect of diversity and collaboration with partners in the community is really a long-haul job. The fact that you've been talking about it or doing some of it for 5-10 years, it might sound like a long time, but it's simply not enough to guarantee that now you can breathe easy and it's going to happen on its own. It's always got to be tended to— and maybe it will always be like that (CO, Consultant).

The notion of “tending” to diversity or having to invest effort in sensitizing staff being a “long haul job” insinuates a certain resistance within the child protection agency. The causes of this may stem from ethnocentric values held by caseworkers. One participant from the child protection agency described how historically, within the agency, “White” caseworker values were not compatible with Black families:

I used to witness some of the exchanges [between staff] — people were clueless. They had no idea whatsoever—their values were White middle-class values, they weren't resonating with Black families. For me—you know it's not so much the cultures it's the—you're missing the boat with your client. The accountability that I have as a social service delivery person is to my client (CPA, Manager).

To correct some of this racial bias, the child protection agency had taken steps to create “Black staff positions” within their agency. A participant from the child protection agency reported:

We have [agency] positions which are designated Black positions. Now I'll admit that they're not all held by Black staff. We have some Caucasian staff that are holding those positions, but they're to have knowledge on the Black community and Black community resources. That is a pre-requisite for them getting the job (CPA, Manager).

Despite the presence of these staff members within the agency, none were asked to sit on the stakeholder committee. There was also mention that a Black Resource Committee had been implemented within the child protection agency, but obtaining contact information for members of this committee was difficult:

To my surprise this [Black Resource Committee] apparently exists but when I asked additional questions it's very sketchy. Who's on it? Whose running it? It used to exist? “Someone went on mat leave so we're not very sure . . .” These people [members of the Black Resource Committee] are apparently trained, and when I said what type of training would that be? They couldn't—the answers were not clear. So, I'm trying to get with her [child protection agency staff] to figure out who's on the committee, what does it really mean? That's also been difficult. That information—It seems like nobody's sure and with

all the changes—my sense is either it should exist and doesn't. Or, it did exist and no longer does (CO, Director).

While the child protection agency was making efforts to deal with diversity issues, the efficiency of these mechanisms was questionable. This situation suggested that anti-oppressive practices might not reflect actual organizational values within traditional public social service agencies. One participant from the child protection agency highlighted this:

I think there's a gap between the traditional government services or the institutional services and the community-based services. Community-based organizations may also carry with it other activities. Advocacy activities—that for people who are working in the system—it's much more difficult politically for them to do that. So, there's a bit of a gap to bridge and I think everybody's aware of it. People don't talk about it in great detail (CPA, Manager).

The participant suggested that the organizational mandate and mission of child protection may make it more difficult for them to advocate on behalf of their clients.

## Discussion

### *Challenging organizational context*

The restructuring experienced by the child protection agency, limited its ability to partner effectively and at times rendered its involvement non-existent. More pressing concerns related to the agency's restructuring, and the retirement of key personnel, overshadowed the agency's commitment to the partnership and their efforts to address the racial disparity experienced by Black children reported to the agency. This was demonstrated by months without scheduled stakeholder committee meetings, delays in program sessions, in addition to the poor promotion of collaboration activities within the agency. When confronted by the demands of agency restructuring and the lives of Black children, the agency trumped. Under CRT, interest convergence posits that the dominant culture only supports the interests of Black people when these interests benefit them as well. Without benefit to the child protection agency, there is little incentive for them to eradicate racism. Thus, changes to advance racial minorities is only possible when they do not require colossal shifts in the way the dominant group lives (Kolivoski et al., 2014). Prioritization of the impacts experienced from the restructuring over the lives of Black children allowed for the perpetuation of neo-colonialism and anti-Black racism.

The specificity of child protection practice had agency participants claiming that the community organization was well suited to “take the lead” in the majority of partnership activities given their experience in program

implementation and social justice. However, a number of tasks delegated to the community organization, including the promotion of the parenting support program within the child protection agency, raised questions about the investment and ownership of the agency within the partnership. This concern was echoed by a participant from the community organization who asked, if the parenting support program was an agency project, then “why doesn’t everybody in the agency know about it?” This handing over of responsibility is reflective of how people of color are expected to perform the additional labor required to educate White institutional spaces. It became the community organization’s responsibility to educate and advocate for support services for Black families amongst agency staff, reflecting the white privilege and power of the agency.

### ***Lack of socio-political support***

Child protection agencies will always be vulnerable to the “revolving door” of management and staff (Collins-Camargo, 2007). The agency director who championed the collaboration had retired and according to participants this individual possessed strong leadership skills and was never replaced. Huxham & Vangen (2013) describe how the spirit of collaboration is only good theoretically and that collaborative thuggery is required to prevent collaborative inertia in instances where extensive barriers and obstacles exist. While in principle the agency could argue for the theoretical need and importance of the partnership, this wasn’t enough when confronted with the obstacles posed from the restructuring. The agency’s adherence to administrative delays and resignation to “red tape” demonstrated leadership that lacked muscle to get things done. Collaborative thuggery in the form of decisive action and tactics were needed to preserve collaboration (Huxham & Vangen, 2013). This would have required the child protection agency and community organization to be more deliberate and aggressive in the development of a strategy for sustaining collaboration.

Participants from the child protection agency were able to describe the merit of the partnership and how they fulfilled their contractual obligations. However, the personal investment and commitment to systemic change that was present at the onset of the partnership appeared to have diminished. Agency participants showed limited knowledge of the community organization’s mandate, they could not consistently identify the acronym of the parenting support program, they referred to the partnership as a “dossier,” and auto-piloted their involvement while leveraging the expertise of the community organization. This finding corroborates previous implementation research regarding the crucial role transformational leadership plays in cultivating positive implementation outcomes (Aarons et al., 2011; Garcia et al., 2020; Palinkas et al., 2014). Poor agency leadership in the area of diversity, runs the risk of sending a message to agency staff that efforts to address diversity are not essential (Hyde, 2004).

### ***Resistant organizational culture***

Organizational culture refers to the underlying reasons and mechanisms for why things occur in an organization and stems from fundamental ideologies, assumptions, and values (Ostroff, Kinicki, & Tamkins, 2003). Within the child protection agency, participants described an organizational culture that was resistant to collaboration. Agency participants described how child protection staff engaged in “gate keeping” thus requiring normative pressures in the form of incentives and supervisory directives to influence staff practices, beliefs, and attitudes (Smith & Mogro-Wilson, 2007). In their description of why agency staff were not likely to make referrals to community services, agency representatives situated the locus of the problem at the caseworker level. They failed to recognize the parallels between their own positionality within the partnership and replication of this at a more micro level. CRT acknowledges that those in power have little incentive to eradicate racism unless there is benefit to them in doing so (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

With regards to resistance to diversity efforts, participants described a culture within the agency that was difficult to penetrate. There was acknowledgment that “White-middle class values” had produced racial biases. The agency demonstrated a commitment to addressing some of these biases through creation of Black staff positions and a Black resource committee. Yet, when the community organization attempted to obtain more information about these specialized resources, the child protection agency skirted the issue and was unable to confirm whether these efforts were ongoing or had been dismantled. Within the stakeholder committee, agency representatives were all White and held management positions within the agency. Given the nature of the partnership and its aim to reduce racial disparity, failure to ensure adequate representation from the Black community within the stakeholder committee serves to further promote racial bias within the agency. The disregard of experiential knowledge gained from involving Black agency voices as stakeholders in providing services to Black families further entrenches institutional racism and white supremacy.

### ***Cross-sector collaborations to reduce racial disparity: Partnership or tokenism?***

This study revealed a cross-sector collaboration that was symbolic and the result of diversity without inclusion, that caused further exploitation of the Black community. The child protection agency’s determination of when and how collaboration would occur left the community organization floundering in their attempts to compensate for the child protection agency’s lack of involvement. The community organization only voiced their concerns when the child protection agency was available to listen, and their views and opinions went overshadowed by the agency’s internal process of reform and

restructuring. This unequal balance of power was also present from the start of the collaboration, with a funding structure that placed the child protection agency in the position of “authorizing” and “releasing” funds. Program implementation was halted because of administrative delays, which posed further deleterious effects for recruitment of Black families into the parenting support program. No process was undertaken to strengthen the infrastructure of the partnership; the child protection agency remained committed only to the essential tasks stipulated in the authorized proposal. Despite a desire to further promote this model of cross-sector collaboration with other ethno-cultural communities, no mechanisms were put in place to ensure this would occur. Thus, the desire to improve service adaptation and increase accessibility for ethno-cultural minorities remained a policy guideline without directives on how to achieve this. The lack of directives and normative pressures left the child protection agency unaccountable in their efforts to collaborate.

Existing literature has demonstrated that cross-sector collaborations to reduce overrepresentation within child protection systems have not been successful when they were not omnipresent. Positive impacts are more likely when approaches are inclusive, multi-faceted, and accompanied by several components. Bilodeau, Lapierre, and Marchand (2003) have suggested that for cross-sector collaborations to be successful, partnering organizations must be equally involved in strategic, tactical and operational planning. The authors suggest that if planning remains only operational in nature, partners will have limited bargaining power and the collaboration will take the form of consultation without negotiation and influence (Bilodeau et al., 2003).

Previous studies of cross-sector collaborations that have managed to reduce overrepresentation were legislated and involved regular review of data, knowledge transfer activities, opportunities for reflection and brainstorming, legitimization of community members among agency staff, and measures of accountability (Lorthridge, McCroskey, Pecora, Chambers, & Fatemi, 2011; Palinkas et al., 2014). Furthermore, efforts to secure engagement occurred at all levels of the agency concerned, from directors, to management to front-line staff. The findings from this study demonstrate that engagement at the stakeholder level and implementation of single-activity approaches are not sufficient to create organizational change. Cross-sector collaborations advocating for systemic change require strong leadership, unwavering agency commitment, opportunities for reflection, and the collective development of conditions necessary to yield an effective partnership. Without most of these features, cross-sector collaborative efforts to reduce overrepresentation run the risk of becoming “empty rituals” of partnership maintaining status quo, that is, token collaborations.

For cross-sector collaborations aiming to reduce overrepresentation and racial disparity, the first step requires identification of agency factors that produce and maintain racial inequity. Our findings illustrate the insidious



ways organizational context and culture, in the absence in the absence of sociopolitical support, produce written and unwritten procedures, processes and regulations that perpetuate colonialism and white supremacy. Bridge and colleagues (2008) underscore that implementation without careful consideration for diversity has the potential for failure and further exploitation of racial minorities. The authors argue that cross-sector collaborations between child protection systems and community organizations seeking to address racial disparity will only be successful when the goal is justice and liberation. The upEND movement seeks to abolish the current child welfare system and replace this with community-based supports (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2020). Scholars have argued that given the persistent and pervasive nature of racial disproportionality and disparity, that an anti-racist framework for reimagining the meaning of child welfare is necessary (Dettlaff et al., 2020). This study supports these arguments and cautions against partnership with child protection systems whose power rests on the foundations of colonialism and white supremacy.

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations to the present study. The cross-sector collaboration examined was a relatively young partnership, with the parenting support program only in its second year of implementation. The developmental stage of any collaboration is critical in marking progress and identifying challenges. Our findings may thus be negatively skewed by choosing to collect data near the beginning of program implementation. Furthermore, the reform and reorganization of the child protection agency created unique challenges in the organizational landscape. While the consequences of restructuring helped bring certain phenomena to light, it may also have obscured other dynamics and limited the applicability of the study. This study only included perspectives of members from the stakeholder committee. Hearing the experience of other participants, such as caseworkers, program staff and users would have helped deepen our understanding of the challenges faced by cross-sector collaborations. Also, while the focus of this study was on challenges, that does not mean there were no positive outcomes from the parenting support program. Lastly, our lack of examination of the community organization and their capacity to partner was largely unexplored.

### **Conclusion**

Collaboration between child protection systems and community has been suggested as one way of reducing the overrepresentation and disparity experienced by Black children and their families. When successful, these forms of partnership help address the disproportionate level of needs faced by

marginalized families and serve to mitigate against racial inequities further propelled by the child protection system. Much of collaboration scholarship has ignored implementation of partnerships aimed at addressing racial disparities within child protection. This study allows for exploration for this particular context by using methodology that centers the experience of a disenfranchised group to critically explore the role of power and racism.

In order to be effective, cross-sector collaborations aiming to reduce disparity require more than expressed agency commitment. They need to stem from anti-racist frameworks that acknowledge the deeply rooted racism within child protection system's history. Partnerships need objectives beyond attainment of cultural competency or program implementation, but rather social justice and liberation. These objectives require prior identification of organizational context and culture that maintain racial inequity, for policy to then allow power to be shared equitably in a manner that allows for high degrees of inter-connectedness, intensity, and inclusive practice. Failing to do so will yield cross-sector collaborations between child protection systems and communities that resemble tokenist approaches rather than meaningful and effective ways for addressing overrepresentation and racial disparity.

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