

Episode 259—Annahita Ball, PhD., Elizabeth Bowen, PhD, and Annette Semanchin Jones, PhD: Cross-Systems Collaboration: Examining the Perspectives and Experiences of Vulnerable Youth and Service Providers

[00:00:08] Welcome to inSocialWork, the podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at www.inSocialWork.org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of inSocialWork is to engage practitioners and researchers in lifelong learning and to promote research to practice and practice to research. We educate. We connect. We care. We're inSocialWork.

[00:00:37] Hello, I'm Louanne Bakk, your host for this episode of inSocialWork. Cross-systems youth, or youth who experience homelessness, child welfare involvement in educational difficulty, often suffer due to lack of continuity and stability in their school and home life as well as in service provision. These children are at risk for a number of negative outcomes, which are in part a reflection of the failure of multiple systems. This podcast is a panel discussion on cross-systems youth. Specifically, our guests describe their research involving the perspectives and experiences of both youth and service providers in relation to education, housing and child welfare systems. They highlight key findings pertaining to each of these domains and consider how the collective impact framework can be applied to improve and promote collaboration between systems and across populations and settings. The episode concludes with a discussion on future work that is needed in regards to research, practice and policy in order to improve outcomes for vulnerable youth. The panel are all faculty members at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. They are Anna Ball, Betsy Bowen and Annette Semanchin Jones. Dr. Ball is an assistant professor who received her Ph.D. from the Ohio State University. Dr. Bowen is an assistant professor who received her Ph.D. from the University of Illinois at Chicago, and Dr. Semanchin Jones is an assistant professor who received her Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota. The panel met for this discussion in October 2018.

[00:02:31] So there are three of us here today that will talk about several research projects we've collaborated on. We'll be asking each other questions and we'll have a brief discussion about the findings from our research. We'll first introduce ourselves though and we'll tell you a little bit about ourselves. I'll start. So my name's Anna Ball and my research primarily centers on educational justice and I look at that really in three different areas. First I look at family engagement in schools and primarily I look at how families are able to develop power and empowerment to create change in schools. And then I also look at collaboration both in schools and out of schools to promote and improve health and human services for children. And then I also look at inclusive school climates and how that can really help to improve education for all students. So next we'll ask Betsy to introduce herself and talk about her research.

[00:03:18] Hi I'm Betsy Bowen. My research focuses on housing and homelessness. My background as a social worker was in managing supportive housing programs for people that were homeless and also affected by HIV and addictions and other health and mental health issues. So that's what really prompted my interest in my research, to look at these connections between housing and homelessness and different aspects of health and health problems and health issues. And more recently I've done some work specifically focusing on homeless youth and the young adult population. And next we'll ask Annette to tell us a little bit about herself.

[00:03:50] My name's Annette Semanchin Jones, and my professional practice experience and my current research is in the area of child welfare. So my professional experience, I worked in child welfare child protective systems as well as working with families and youth to prevent involvement in the child welfare system. And my research is focused on promoting child well-being for children and families who are involved in the child welfare system, specifically looking at well-being of older youth in foster care and really making sure that they have supportive connections as they're

aging out of the foster care system. So we want to talk a little bit about how we came to work together on this topic of cross-systems youth. Nancy can you talk a little bit of how these projects get started?

[00:04:37] Sure. So I have this clear image in my mind of the three of us having coffee and it was the end of winter break. This was I believe January 2016 and we were just catching up and having conversations about what each of us were working on and if we may have each thought about this before but I think when we came together that time it really became clear to all three of us that when we talk about young people that are involved in the child welfare system, young people experiencing housing issues and homelessness, whether that's on their own or with their families, and young people that are having educational disadvantage and having problems in schools, we realize that we're often talking literally about the same kids, about the same young people. So I think that was what really started to plant those seeds for us of trying to do some work that would look at these issues explicitly from a cross-systems perspective. Because certainly there's a lot of work that looks at each of these issues on their own. So the studies about child welfare or about homelessness or about educational difficulties, there's even a fair amount of work that looks at issues from the perspective of, say two systems. So for example how kids experiencing homelessness do in school and the challenges they have, or how kids in foster care might do in school. But there's really a lot less work that looks at things explicitly from the view of multiple systems and tries to tackle this issue of when kids are involved in more than one system, how can those systems come together in a more effective way to serve the issues that cross-systems youth face? So I think we were really on the same page from the beginning that when we decided we wanted to do some research on this, the first thing we wanted to do was to make sure that we were grounded in the experiences of young people themselves who have experienced this type of cross system involvement. So in our first study we interviewed 20 young adults who had previously experienced cross system involvement in childhood and we asked them some questions about their experiences in these systems and about what they wish they had had at the time, what would have made things better for them. And then from there we decided it was also important to hear providers' perspectives. And so in our second study we did focus groups and interviews with 35 providers from across these three systems so that we could also hear about things from their viewpoint. So in the first study that I mentioned we interviewed young adults who had previously experienced child maltreatment, homelessness and problems in school. So Annette, could you tell us what to these young people have to say about their experiences, and what did you learn from this?

[00:06:58] Thanks Betsy. So as Betsy mentioned, we really wanted to start with finding out from the youth themselves what their experiences were. That was our first project. One of the most compelling things that we found across all of these youth was that it really was not just one single event that precipitated decline for youth and their outcomes but rather there was a cumulative risk. So we saw that risks accumulated over time for all of these youth, they experience multiple stressors. Again, experiencing different periods of housing challenges, homelessness, involvement with the child welfare system and educational challenges and these risks really accumulated over time. Some of those specific challenges that we found across all of the youth that youth really talked about impacting their lives throughout their development was very high mobility. And they describe this in multiple ways. They describe mobility in schools, so moving schools throughout their development, moving schools and elementary school, multiple schools for high school. They also described mobility just in their housing. So either experiencing lots of moves with their families or also as young adults, so experiencing times of homelessness, doubling up with folks. So really a lot of movement in where they were living. And for children involved in the child welfare system, they also described multiple moves and placements in foster care, so living with their relatives for a while and then going back home, living in foster care or group homes and then returning home. So lots of movement and mobility for these youth, and they really described what a profound impact

that had on them. Disrupting friendships, social networks, supportive networks. So youth really talked about the negative impact of all of these moves on their lives, including a lack of control. Youth really described often having very little or no control over these major decisions that were impacting their lives, like what schools are going to go to or what adult they're going to live with. And not only do they not have control you've also talked about a lot of times not even really understanding what was happening. So the adults in these systems, welfare workers or school personnel, they described that they really were not communicating with the youth to really help them understand why these moves were happening and what the impact might be. So because of this, youth also described really having a distrust of the quote unquote system. So you talked about particularly if they disclose something to a school staff or a teacher or other adult that describing a maltreatment that they really describe the tribal system either under-reacting, so really not doing anything at all. So the child was still at risk, or for some this system overreacted and really created a lot of upheaval in the youth's lives. So the youth that we talked to you really felt like they just didn't disclose that information anymore. They didn't know who they can trust to really help them get out of a bad situation. So really many of the youth describe feeling like they were completely on their own, that they really raised themselves. That they just felt they did not have the support of their family or of the other adults in the systems that just weren't really there for them. We also asked the youth to talk about what they would recommend for us as service providers for the adults in these systems, what would they recommend to make things better for them. And one of the things that the youth described was using a trauma informed approach. None of that youth use that exact language but they really talked about what a trauma informed approach would look like. They asked the adults in these systems, the service providers and other adults to read between the lines. To look beyond just the youth's negative behavior and to really understand that oftentimes youth were acting that way because of their past trauma, past grief and loss. And so youth really were asking adults to step up, to be an advocate for them. And a lot of these programs in schools that youth were really talking about there needed to be more flexibility that many times, right now the rules for these programs and schools are really punitive and youth saw that there was a different way that systems could be more flexible and more supportive. So after talking with youth it really seemed very clear that the young people in these various systems could benefit from systems that were collaborating and working together better. So Anna, could you tell us a little bit about some of the barriers that seem to be getting in the way of this collaboration happening?

[00:11:35] Yes, so we looked at this in our second study that Betsy mentioned and we asked service providers what they thought the barriers were to cross-systems collaboration. And they identified quite a few. They spoke specifically about five types of barriers that get in the way of their collaboration. And so one of the first ones that they talked about often was just having differing goals and priorities across the systems, and they felt just as simply as having different missions of the agencies and that they weren't really very well aligned and that sometimes they even had very different goals entirely. So just not even being on the same page, if the agencies and organizations and the systems all have different goals and missions they're just going down different paths and different roads towards service provision and aren't really even able to collaborate. They also talked about having done poor communication. So many of them just talked about this really being due to just having so many different people involved in youth care and that no one is really talking to each other at all. This is often a problem within an agency or an organization or a system but they mention this specifically also across systems. So then also related to that is having a limited understanding of other systems. Providers specifically said that they felt like other agencies and systems didn't understand how their own agencies operated, but they also acknowledged that they probably don't really understand how other agencies and systems operated as well. So another clear barrier they mentioned though is bureaucratic red tape, that almost in some ways literally created barriers for them. They talked about having to quote, jump through hoops and noting that quote, the rules are just changing every five seconds. So across all of these four previous barriers they mentioned what really came across as a lack of trust. So the providers felt that they did do a good

job building trust with their clients. But then what they were worried about is sending those clients that they worked so hard to build trust with across to another system and those systems not falling through or not working with their clients in a way that they really thought would be appropriate. And so they didn't trust each other and they didn't want to collaborate because of that. What's really important to note though is that not only did the providers talk about these individual level barriers to cross systems collaboration, but they also talked about external sort of more structural influences that were barriers to that collaboration. And these included policies, so specifically policies around eligibility requirements and service gaps. So for instance they would talk about how they may be able to take a client in their agency or organization but other agencies or organizations and other systems wouldn't allow that client to be served because of different eligibility requirements. So they're not able to collaborate because they don't even serve the same populations due to the policies and often then the funding sources. So they also then talked about just plain limited resources. A really clear example that came across is that there aren't enough housing options for young adults and so an agency may be able to make a referral to another system. But if there just isn't anywhere for that client to go that type of collaboration is over. They also talked about having large caseload sizes and that ultimately comes down to not having enough resources and the large caseload sizes just prevent them from engaging in the types of collaborations that they would like to because they just don't have enough time to do the work that's involved in collaborating. So we also then after doing these interviews with providers, we started to think about solutions, what are some ways that we could address these barriers. And what became apparent to us was the collective impact model, which was sort of bubbling up nationally and we were interested in how it could help the vulnerable young people that we're really interested in working with and so that includes those exploring homelessness, child maltreatment and educational disadvantage. So Betsy could you tell us a little bit about collective impact and what it is?

[00:15:18] Sure. So Collective Impact is a framework that recognizes the complex social problems, and that could include homelessness, that could include child abuse, it could include educational opportunity. But these kinds of issues are not going to be solved by a single system or a single entity. So collective impact looks at what it would take for different kinds of systems and shareholders to come together to better collaborate to address these kind of complex social issues. And specifically collective impact specifies some of the ingredients or some of the conditions that would lead to an effective, sustainable cross-system collaboration. So these conditions include things like having a shared agenda across all the different parties and the collaboration, having continuous communication between all different parties and having a backbone organization. So that's kind of ideal if there's a single organization that can serve as a clearinghouse or a coordinator between the other different systems in the collaboration. Collective Impact is not our framework. So John Kaniya and Mark Kramer are the original authors of collective impact. They introduced the idea in a 2011 article in Stanford Social Innovation Review. And since then it's been cited more than a thousand times, so that's just one indicator that there's really a huge amount of academic interest, as well as practical on the ground interest and collective impact and how it could help improve these types of collaborations. So in our research we became interested in trying to see if systems are already using some of these principles of collective impact and if they're not, if they might be able to use and apply some of these conditions or principles to address some of the barriers that Anna mentioned that do often get in the way of cross-systems collaborations to serve vulnerable young people. So we're continuing to analyze that and to look at that in our research. The one thing that I think has already come up for us so far is just an awareness that Collective Impact is not going to be a magic bullet. And I think unfortunately there is no magic bullet for creating effective collaborations, that it's more complex than that. So while the principles that are included in the collective impact would certainly I think help improve collaboration, we're also seeing that there's other factors at play. And one thing that comes up is the importance of trauma informed care. So both clinically with families and children but also using some of those same trauma informed principles in collaborations to build trust. And I think also to Anna's point about resource gaps,

that's important to recognize as well, that when there is a shortage of resources in any of these systems that can be a barrier in itself to collaboration. So we wanted to share what was the most eye opening or surprising finding for each of us in the research so far. And I'll go first. In this, for me this speaks to my last point about resource gaps and so a big takeaway for me has been just to have some recognition and some humility about the limitations of collaboration and that there are some problems that I think you can't collaborate your way around. And specifically when there are these structural barriers and serious gaps in resources, it's a resource problem rather than a collaboration problem. So one concrete example of that is that here in Buffalo where we conduct our research we don't have emergency shelters specifically for young adults, so we have a shelter for young people under age 18. But once the young person hits the age of 18 if they are experiencing homelessness and they need to go to a shelter, their only option is to go to one of the shelters that serve the general homeless adult population. And I've seen in this work and in some of my other research a lot of young people that are 18 or 19, they are going to be much younger than most people that are using those shelters and a lot of young people really don't feel safe in those environments. So that's just one example of when the resource doesn't exist it doesn't matter how well you collaborate or how much trust you build. If the resource isn't there that's going to continue to be an issue. The solution to that is not better collaboration, but in some cases the solution is advocacy. So that has been one big takeaway for me. Anna, do you want to tell us what is the most eye opening finding for you so far?

[00:19:15] Yeah, as I mentioned most of my own research centers on schools and public education and doing this research it became really clear to me that schools really are very different in how they interact with other service providers. And I think this is sometimes a detriment to school community collaborations. The education system has very different goals and priorities than other youth and family service systems. And sometimes the other youth and family service systems' goals and priorities are more in common with each other than they are with schools, so schools sort of get siloed and to some extent left out of the party basically. We need to really think differently about how we engage schools and collaborations because kids spend a lot of time in schools and schools are critical in prevention and early identification for youth and they need to be at the table. That also means though that we need to think more from a school's perspective about how education can make some shifts also, because they need to be more collaborative as well in support of children and families and I think ultimately what this means is that all of these systems need to find a way to meet in the middle. And schools need to be included as well. So Annette, do you also want to share your most eye opening or surprising finding?

[00:20:19] Sure. I think one of the things that resonated with all of us, and certainly resonated with me, is that youth really talked about the role of supportive adults or caring adults, we could call them natural mentors, that really could be a significant protective factor for youth. So again, as youth are dealing with all of these multiple challenges that again have accumulated over time, the role of supportive adults could really play an important role in changing the trajectory for youth. The youth that we talked to you really recognized the need to have adults who will really stick with them, adults that will advocate for them, adults that will help youth to advocate for themselves to learn those self advocacy skills. And also youth talked about having adults in their lives that really set high expectations for the youth. They really expect more from the youth and help them get to those goals. And youth identified all different types of roles within these systems and beyond. So you talked about having natural mentors or supportive adults that were case workers, a Child Protection case worker, a staff person at a shelter, a school nurse, a coach or extended family members. So youth identified a wide variety of adults, but I think one of the most compelling things for me was really looking at how systems can do more. We know these adults who are already out there, youth are identifying people that have helped them that they reached out to you. So what can systems do to identify these adults within these systems and beyond, how can we mobilize these adults and maybe most importantly how can the system support adults so that they feel prepared to

help youth and support youth on their path to better outcomes. And so I think that's really something that was compelling for us is finding ways to do that even better. So I know that we've learned a lot from these projects so far. We wanted to talk just a little bit about kind of our ongoing plans and work. Anna, can you share a little bit about our next steps for this research?

[00:22:22] Sure. So we've been really energized and excited by this research that we've done so far and we have a lot of ideas about where to go next. I think first in light of what I mentioned earlier about schools, we'd like to dig a little bit deeper into the education system to understand cross-systems collaboration from educators' perspectives, our research with service providers was light on the education side. So we really do want to make sure that we're including the voices of educators. And so our next steps are to do that purposefully. We're also planning to unpack collective impact a little bit more. There are a few local examples of collective impact. So we'd like to begin working with organizations on cross systems cooperation to develop the different conditions and understand maybe the precursors to collective impact. Finally we're also planning to develop a measure of cross-systems collaboration that's rooted in collective impact that is informed by the qualitative work that we've done so far. We also recognize the importance of real world impact and so we've had a lot of interest from the community already and were conducted continuing education workshops with practitioners and we're consulting with school based providers about our research directly, so we see part of our ongoing work as continuing to dialogue with community partners that work within the systems and we hope that this work can help to improve corporations within our local community and more broadly to improve outcomes for cross-systems youth.

[00:23:39] You've been listening to a panel discussion on cross-systems youth with doctors Ball, Bowen and Semanchin Jones. We hope you have enjoyed this podcast and please join us again. Thank you.

[00:24:01] Hi I'm Nancy Smyth, Professor and Dean of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school, our history, our online and on the ground degree and continuing education programs, we invite you to visit our Web site at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. And while you're there check out our technology and social work resource center. You'll find it under the Community Resources menu.