

The Conflict and Benefit of Organizational Cultures in Cross-Sector Collaborations

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Abstract

This article describes a collaborative model that enabled research into the behavior and achievement of students displaced by Hurricane Katrina. School-university partnerships sometimes involve other institutions. Three organizations—a state education agency, a university, and a private non-profit research organization—shared expertise, data, and resources to complete the study. This article examines the nature and benefits of this collaboration. The goal of the partnership was to discern patterns in the behavior and achievement of students displaced by Hurricane Katrina to public schools in Mississippi. The roles of the partners varied. The university researchers initiated the proposal to study displaced students as a follow-up to previous research into the impact of the storm upon schools, staff, and students. The university researchers also developed the research protocol in collaboration with Mississippi Department of Education senior administrators.

Keywords: collaboration, research, leadership, students, displacement

Introduction

The orientation of the analysis acknowledges the state Department of Education as the primary beneficiary of the partnership. Agency leaders expressed the need to have additional analysis of the status of displaced students. They lacked resources to manage such analysis. They were, however, custodians of a vast array of student and school data that could be analyzed in order to determine the status of displaced students. These data were provided by the agency after measures were taken to safeguard the identity of individual students.

While the university was prepared to allow time for the researchers to conduct this study, additional resources and expertise were needed. The RAND Gulf State Policy Institute (RGSPI) provided funding to cover the costs of some release time for the principal investigator and the primary analyst. The bulk of the grant covered the costs of a contract to secure the services of a data technician. RGSPI also provided expert consultation with a senior RAND scientist who had studied the impact of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in Louisiana.

Perspectives on Interagency Collaboration for Research

There is significant potential for enhancing services to children when schools and other agencies collaborate. The need for such cooperation intensifies in times of crisis and when addressing the needs of children in difficult circumstances. However, Stone, D'Andrade, and Austin (2007) note differences in the perceptions of school and other agency representatives regarding not only the needs of vulnerable children in school, but also “the role and motives of each agency in addressing these needs” (p. 53). Adler (1994) notes that partnerships are not just dependent upon formal agency-to-agency agreements; the effectiveness of such collaboration is ultimately dependent upon the interaction of individuals; “interpersonal ties are critical to the success of the interorganizational relationships” (p. 22). She further notes the difficulties

associated with clarifying roles, learning other agencies' terminology and policies, and finding time to work cooperatively.

Research into the effects of a widespread disaster is important for multiple reasons. Such inquiry can provide useful insights regarding services and support needed by victims in the aftermath of the crisis. Studies of this sort help to inform policy-making so that communities and institutions are better positioned for future catastrophes. In light of these observations, it seems essential to conduct systematic and extensive research into the impact of a large-scale disaster upon stakeholders in an institution as large as public education.

The state education agency in an affected area is presumably a logical entity to produce such studies; however, the resources available to these agencies often do not allow for research efforts beyond those related to core functions. The impact of limited resources is exacerbated by the myriad additional tasks associated with response to a disaster and its aftermath. Such was the situation that confronted the Mississippi Department of Education in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. This was arguably a set of circumstances that called for interagency collaboration.

In response to the Department's need for additional research assistance, the University of Southern Mississippi offered to conduct research into the storm's impact upon the achievement and behavior of displaced students. The University was aided by a grant provided by a third collaborator—the RAND Gulf States Policy Institute. This institute, established after the hurricanes of 2005 by the RAND Corporation and seven Gulf States universities, was created to provide evidence-based policy guidance to facilitate regional recovery, re-establish services, and promote wise investment in infrastructure.

Pertinent Literature

There is a relatively scant body of literature on the specific type of three-member partnership described herein; i.e., a state department of education, a university, and a private non-profit research organization. While school-university partnerships are fairly commonplace, the particular school entity involved in this collaborative project was the state's department of education. The participation of the third party added an additional element of novelty. Collaboration by the RAND Gulf States Policy Institute was secured by the university partner; RGSPI provided funding for the project and access to consultation with a senior scientist at the RAND Corporation as the project was implemented.

Motivation for and Nature of Interagency Collaboration

School agencies collaborate with universities and other agencies/organizations for a number of reasons. Funding and other assets needed to initiate projects not within the scope of a current year's budget are not in abundant supply. Collaboration is also frequently undertaken by one organization in order to take advantage of another's perceived expertise. In addition, agencies frequently engage in partnerships in order to gain access to records and data uniquely available in the information reservoirs of another agency. Jonson-Reid (2000) notes the particular interest of institutions whose work focuses primarily upon children in sharing information; such interest is typically couched in terms of enhancing services and, in some instances, better assuring the safety of children. While the motivation of school agencies to engage in school-university partnerships frequently centers on increasing resources available for school priorities, collaborative research activities are typically initiated and carried out by the university partners (Gottlieb et al, 1999).

Educational organizations have to examine the tasks that need to be completed and, when afforded the discretion, determine those that they are well-suited and adequately resourced to manage. At the same time they need to consider those tasks that might be better handled by other entities, and determine which can be managed through collaborative efforts (Guthrie & Guthrie, 1991). Once clarity about the third category of activity has been achieved, the synergistic value of collaboration with other agencies can be pursued. “In participatory research, individual units track their own performance as a subsystem to maintain accountability on that level. This arrangement requires the collaborative to identify goals, needs, and strengths as well as design a systematic process to conduct research and self-evaluation” (Corrigan 2000, p. 189).

The sharing of resources is a potential benefit of interagency collaboration. Among the most crucial shared resources are information and data. Meaningful collaboration requires access to well-organized, unambiguous records (Kamimura, 2003). However, collaboration also requires sensitivities to certain constraints on access to information; e.g., sharing of confidential records and data. Greenberg and Levy (1992) concluded that in circumstances in which the achievement of shared goals necessitates access to sensitive information, partners are well-advised to adopt objective “need-to-know” criteria, along with well-designed information exchange processes, for the sharing of sensitive content.

Bello (2006) provides a useful delineation of the questions that should be addressed when school agencies contemplate collaborative agreements with universities and other institutions:

1. What research issue could we choose? Why? On what criteria could we base our choice of research issue? What lines of action can we implement with a view to understanding and trying to improve the situation in connection with the issue?

2. What information do we need to advance the understanding of each of those lines of action? Which are the sources to obtain this information?
3. What data collection and analysis strategies and techniques can we employ?
4. Who is going to take part in the research project? Why?
5. How much time are the people taking part in the research project able to devote to it?
6. How long do we expect the study to take?
7. How much work do we think that getting involved in the project is going to entail for the parties concerned?
8. What roles can each member of the team take on?
9. How much time are we going to dedicate to the planning, the collection of information and the individual and joint analysis?
10. On which groups will we centre the observation? Why?
11. How are we going to proceed to exchange information?
12. Who is going to have access to that information?
13. When should we draw up partial reports of the research? Who will be responsible for their editing and what circulation will they have?
14. How are we going to inform the other members of the school community about our research work and how are we going to collect and reflect on their suggestions (p. 17)?

The above-mentioned questions suggest that considerable planning is necessary as collaborators carry out their respective roles in a multi-agency partnership. Coordination of activity and clarity regarding respective partner roles within a partnership is essential to achieving the goals of the collaboration. Bekemeier et al (2007) found that comprehensive planning and depth of

commitment from all participants strengthened partnerships' prospects for securing resources for their initiatives.

Potential Benefits of Interagency Collaboration

There are a number of potential benefits of such collaboration. As was noted previously, school agencies, including state departments of education, have limited resources, typically dedicated to specific purposes (Bruner, 1991). Pooling resources with universities and other agencies/organizations to achieve an aim of perceived mutual benefit can create greater efficiencies and thus expand the potential scope and quality of a joint initiative.

The expansion of resources through collaboration appears to be of even greater significance in times of difficulty. Bekemeier (2007) found that partnerships enhanced the capability of states to argue for additional resources in the face of unanticipated events. Robinson, Hicklin, and Meier (2006) found that the perception of benefit to the partner organizations that can be derived from collaboration also increases in such circumstances. In the wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, school agencies in affected areas were more likely to embrace partnerships; "schools that felt greater degrees of impact were more likely to seek assistance from external organizations, including collaboration with a diverse array of government, non-profit and for-profit organizations" (Robinson, Hicklin, and Meier 2006, p. 1).

Interagency collaboration expands the expertise that can be brought to bear on initiatives of mutual interest. Areas of expertise of colleges and universities that are typically valued most by school-level partners are research capacity, and skills in needs assessment, grant writing, and technical assistance (Gottlieb, 1999). Multiple perspectives are useful in framing the issues and clarifying intended outcomes. School agencies are perceived as providing authentic settings and "real-world" insights for university collaborators (Gottlieb, 1999). Pairing practitioners with

research institutions in “an interstitial system composed of academics and agency personnel, drawing on the unique talents and contributions of each, can work together in improving the quality of practice while simultaneously meeting the separate needs of each constituency (Sundet and Kelly, 2007).

The political dimensions of school – university partnerships suggest both benefits and potential pitfalls of collaboration. Among the political benefits derived by schools is the enhanced capacity of universities to advocate on behalf of programs that are perceived to be of mutual interest (Gottlieb, 1999).

Exchange of knowledge and information across agencies is another benefit of collaboration. Combining records, archives, and data sets has significant potential to yield significant new findings of mutual interest to collaborative partners, findings that in many instances would not be possible but for the combining of information resources. In discussing findings relative to a study of an interagency information sharing process, Gannon-Leary et al (2006) observed, “The promise of a technical solution that would make high quality, timely information available across professional boundaries was attractive and partners from various agencies were able to sign up to it” (p. 672).

Barriers to Interagency Collaboration

Just as there are benefits to school agency – university partnerships, there are potential barriers to such collaboration. Among these barriers are interpersonal propensities that manifest themselves in the partnership activities. University faculty are prone to view themselves as the experts in such circumstances and may be perceived as overly controlling (Gottlieb et al, 1999). School practitioners and administrators may perceive that they are more expert with respect to the realities of P-12 services and challenges.

From the initiation of a collaborative venture, a persistent source of potential disruption to the project is clarity about commitment to and the nature of the actual goal(s) of the partnership. While the overarching goals of the collaboration may be relatively easy to articulate, operationalizing them for research and implementation is more difficult (Sundet and Kelly, 2007). The difficulties inherent in operationalizing such aims are related to yet another risk that is somewhat unique to university partners; adapting research protocols to the interests of the client sometimes causes the neutrality of the investigators and the integrity of research to be compromised. Needham (2000) and others suggest that this is typically of greater concern in university – industry collaborations. However, the potential also exists in other types of partnerships to “. . . alter the trust dynamics that underpin research and innovation” (Fulop and Couchman, p. 163).

Misunderstandings and disputes over resources are among the most frequently observed barriers to effective interagency partnership. School agencies often are ill-informed about the limits of academic resources that can actually be provided by university partners (Gottlieb, 1999). Corrigan (2000) describes resource constraints that are most likely to impact collaboration: time, personnel, and facilities. State departments of education and state-funded universities are often in competition for the same revenue sources. Gottlieb (1999) found that jurisdictional issues “hindered advocacy efforts and interpersonal relationships with faculty at colleges/*universities* and intensified the struggle over controlling funds” (p. 311). If a particular collaborative partner is perceived as the lead agency in an initiative, other partners sometimes may feel a diminished responsibility to provide funding (Gardner, 1992). Guthrie and Guthrie (1991) add to the list of resource concerns the commitment of time, personnel, and other assets to

create bureaucratic structures ostensibly designed to assure coordination of activity, when in fact, they add to the expense of tasks without adding value to work processes and products.

The combining of expertise and diverse orientations has been acknowledged as a benefit of collaboration between schools, universities, and other agencies/organizations. There are also potential detriments to the blending of perspectives across multiple institutions. Gottlieb et al (1999) found that “the culture and reward systems of colleges/universities were seen by informants from all groups to emphasize theory and research over providing service and collaboration” (p. 310). Fulop and Couchman caution “In cross-sector collaborations, the clash of cultures between sectors means that performance risks are often more difficult to manage” (p. 170). These clashes may be ideological in nature, and may be exacerbated by other communication problems. Genefke (2001) noted the problem of undisclosed agendas. Gardner (1992) observed the detrimental impact of information that flows poorly between agencies, either due to technical systems that do not interface well, statutory or administrative constraints that deter release of information, or unwillingness to share sensitive data. The technical infrastructure to support such exchange can be frustratingly slow (Gannon-Leary et al 2006, p. 672).

Yet another risk in interagency collaboration is the possibility of unethical behavior on the part of one or more partners. Such conduct can include the violation of confidentiality protocols, leaking sensitive information, and even overt exploitation (Genefke, 2001). The latter can include pilfering proprietary information and data in order to achieve some type of advantage or gain. Another example of unethical conduct includes opportunistic attempts by one or more partners to achieve disproportionate shares of credit, acclaim, or benefit proceeding from a collaborative project.

Methodology

“The primary goal of a basic qualitative study is to uncover and interpret the meanings” (Merriam, 2002, p.39). Qualitative research provides an opportunity for the researchers to share in the experiences of people. This part of the study examined the perceptions of individuals from the three partner agencies engaged in examining the behavior and achievement of students displaced by Hurricane Katrina. Specifically, the researchers examined perceptions regarding the nature and benefits of interagency collaboration designed to produce research regarding the behavior and achievement of displaced students in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Qualitative research was also selected because of the unique nature of the problem being studied.

The researchers were the instrument of data collection and the research centered on the meaning provided by participants. Through the use of open-ended questions, the researchers were able to gather and interpret data. True to phenomenological tradition, the researchers sought to understand the structure of the phenomenon as it presented itself.

Research Questions

The following specific research questions were examined within the context of the qualitative study; these questions were consistent with themes that emerged in the literature review and were organized into three broad categories based upon this review. The questions were posed to the participants from the three partner agencies in order to gauge their perceptions.

Motivation For and Nature of Interagency Collaboration

1. Why was this study of the behavior and achievement of students displaced by Hurricane Katrina undertaken?

2. What was your understanding of the respective roles of and contributions by the Mississippi Department of Education, the University of Southern Mississippi, and the RAND Gulf States Policy Institute in this collaboration?

Benefits of Interagency Collaboration

3. Were there specific features of the collaboration and research that worked well? Why?
4. Was the multi-agency collaboration by the Mississippi Department of Education, the University of Southern Mississippi, and the RAND Gulf States Policy Institute useful in achieving the purposes of the study? Why or why not?
5. Did this study generate products? Were these products useful? Please elaborate.
6. Do you believe that this research will be useful in public policy and action? If so, how will the research be useful? If so, in which areas of public policy will the research be useful?

Barriers to Interagency Collaboration

7. What, if any, potential problems in the multi-agency collaboration by the Mississippi Department of Education, the University of Southern Mississippi, and the RAND Gulf States Policy Institute were anticipated in advance of the study? What actions, if any, were taken?
8. Were there features of the collaboration and research that did not work well? If so, what, if any, steps were taken to address these problems? To what degree did these steps resolve the problems?

Research Design

The research design employed for this study was a qualitative protocol. Specifically, the paradigm of phenomenology guided the research procedures. Munhall (1994) stated that phenomenology is “a philosophy, an approach, or perspective to living, learning, and doing research” (p. 3). The phenomenological paradigm provokes naturalistic inquiry “to inductively and holistically understand human experience in context-specific settings” (Patton, 1990, p. 37). Accordingly, the phenomenological researcher believes there are various means and methods for interpreting events. The first consideration for conducting a phenomenological study is to identify the phenomenon being explored. The researcher then develops research questions. In developing research questions the phenomenologist understands there is not a single reality; rather each individual constructs his own reality. The individual’s interpretation of an event comprises reality for that individual (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). The goal of the researcher is to understand the research environment, the individuals, and their behavior. Glesne and Peshkin (1992) noted analysis is an immediate and ongoing process of qualitative research. Using a phenomenological approach requires qualitative methods, which seek to provide a more holistic picture of the respondents’ experiences than mere generalizations (Guba and Lincoln, 1981).

The data gathering process employed the research questions as a guide to structured interviews. The interview questionnaire is attached as Appendix A. Qualitative data analysis involved identifying, coding, and categorizing patterns found in the data. Having coded and analyzed the data, a narrative was prepared to in order to elaborate research findings.

Participants

A mixed methods study uses an inquiry approach that integrates several qualitative and quantitative techniques for data collection and analysis. The sample population for the qualitative

study of perceptions regarding interagency collaboration included representatives from the three partner organizations. It should be noted that the researchers who were involved in the quantitative analysis of student behavior and achievement were, as key collaborators, included among the participants. Creswell noted, “For mixed methods researchers, pragmatism opens the door to multiple methods, different worldviews and different assumptions as well as different forms of data collection and analysis” (2003, p. 12). Participants from the three agencies are profiled below:

Mississippi Department of Education

- State superintendent of education
- Associate state superintendent of education for academic education
- Director of the office of research and statistics

The University of Southern Mississippi

- An associate professor of educational leadership as the principal researcher
- An associate professor of educational leadership as co-researcher
- Data analyst

The RAND Gulf States Policy Institute

- Director of the RAND Gulf States Policy Institute
- Senior information scientist in the RAND Education division

Instrumentation

Interview protocols were developed using appropriate instrumentation, including the previously mentioned survey instrument. The research questions were developed based upon the researcher’s preliminary perspectives on the nature of the phenomenon, in this case, a specific occurrence of interagency collaboration to study the behavior and achievement of students

displaced by Hurricane Katrina. The researcher then conducted a review of pertinent literature. The research questions were constructed based upon themes that arose from this review, then submitted for critique by a colleague with expertise in qualitative research protocols. The research questions were posed to participants in live interviews conducted by the researcher. Participants were given the opportunity to make comments not related specifically to the questions. Interviews were tape recorded in order to capture responses accurately and aid in assuring fidelity in the coding of the data.

Researcher as Instrument

Essential to the process of conducting qualitative research is the acknowledgement of researcher as a research instrument (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The researcher is the primary individual gathering data from respondents. The researcher's participation and facilitative manner provides an opportunity for respondents to share rich data from their life experiences. In this study the principal researcher conducted the interviews associated with the qualitative study of interagency collaboration. The researcher was also included among the participants and responded to the questions in the research protocol. His voice is included in the responses, but proportionately represented. He has also given voice in similar proportion to each of the additional participants. As noted by Guba and Lincoln (1981), the researcher becomes a part of the phenomenological approach and potential concerns are “more than offset by the flexibility, insight, and ability to build on tacit knowledge that is the peculiar province of the human instrument” (p. 113).

While the participation of the researcher was, as is suggested above, a legitimate dimension of the study, it is important to disclose the biases of the researcher. As a resident of Mississippi, and as an individual actively involved in both disaster response and research into the

impact of Katrina upon schools, staff, and students, the researcher believes strongly that broad-based, multi-agency strategies and policy initiatives are needed to address the long-term effects of the storm. Specifically, the researcher has examined the academic and behavioral challenges experienced by displaced students and believes that additional strategies and resources are needed to address their plight.

Data Analysis and Management

The researcher in this specific study developed a coding scheme, based upon the literature on interagency collaboration that consisted of labels that represented the conceptual categories into which to sort the data. The a priori coding system was chosen. When utilizing a priori coding, the categories are established prior to the researcher's analysis of the content. The researcher draws conclusions about the categories, and the coding process is applied directly to the data. Re-examination of the content is continual, and categories increase during the researchers' pursuit of mutual exclusivity and thoroughness (Weber, 1990).

Segments of the data were marked with relevant codes. The researcher wrote memos throughout the coding process, recording emerging ideas and early conclusions. As insights were gained, the researcher continually searched the data to locate related phenomena in the text. The process of reading the data and constant review provided the means for both coding new chunks of data while examining the validity of emerging conclusions. Making repeated passes through the data resulted in slight modifications of the a priori coding scheme.

Results

Introduction

The broad themes that emerged in literature on interagency collaboration were the basis upon which the research questions were organized and formed the initial categories against which the data were coded. These original major themes included:

- Motivation for and nature of interagency collaboration
- Benefits of interagency collaboration
- Barriers to Interagency collaboration

Additional themes and sub-themes emerged as the data were coded. While the original broad categories remained useful in the organization of data, the addition of a major category and the elaboration of sub-categories beneath the additional and previously identified major themes aided in the organization and overall sense of the participants' perspectives on the collaboration.

The final construction of the themes and sub-themes was as follows:

- Motivation for and nature of interagency collaboration
 - Enabling projects that could not easily be fulfilled by a single agency
 - Gaining access to expertise
 - Gaining access to data and information
 - Making a difference (altruism)
- Barriers to Interagency collaboration
 - Failing to commit to the goals of the collaboration
 - Failing to understand different organizational cultures
 - Failing to understand desired commitments at the outset of collaboration
 - Failing to provide resources
 - Misinterpreting/misusing/abusing data
 - Misunderstanding unique terminology and technologies

- Failing to anticipate policy barriers
- Enablers of interagency collaboration
 - Assuring effective communication
 - Shouldering the load
 - Attending to the relational dimensions of interaction
 - Demonstrating sensitivity/adaptability
- Benefits of interagency collaboration
 - Sharing resources and efficiently using resources
 - Generating useful products

The responses of participants are analyzed within the context of these themes and sub-themes. Participants provide the following reflections in response to research questions that allowed these respondents to explore their perspectives on the three-party collaboration.

Motivation For and Nature of Interagency Collaboration

The first of the major themes identified in the examination of the literature on interagency collaboration were the factors that prompt one or more organization to seek the partnership of others. Related to this topic was the nature of interagency collaboration. Coding of responses led to the identification of multiple sub-themes, which are described in the following sections and elaborated through the voices of the participants.

Enabling Projects That Could Not Easily Be Fulfilled by a Single Agency

Respondents offered numerous observations suggesting a key motivation for the partnership was the inability of any one agency to accomplish what was envisioned in the research protocol for the study of the behavior and achievement of students displaced by

Hurricane Katrina. Six of the seven participants offered commentary consistent with this perspective. A sample of these statements is instructive:

- Even though it's of interest, legislative mandates don't leave time for things like this that are interesting policy and practical issues, but that [MDE] can't devote time to.
- It is of interest, but when the [MDE] has limited staff with the background, knowledge, and experience, and they have other responsibilities, there's very limited time to do something like this.
- The knowledge of all three agencies, was very helpful in making sure that we were collecting data in the way that we needed to collect it and making sure that the analysis was done accurately in terms of the way the data were presented.
- Yes; each played an important role. MDE's cooperation was essential—without the data, we could not have done such an analysis.
- Absolutely. If any of the three partners had not been available, it's hard to see the project being pulled off.
- This is interesting information that helps us better understand what's happening with these kids, that realistically, we would not have been able to do any other way.

Gaining Access to Expertise

Participants mentioned the skills and knowledge that were distributed among partner agencies as a key determinant in the viability of the study of displaced students. Each respondent mentioned institutional or individual expertise within at least one of the collaborating organizations other than his/her own. A representative sample of these observations is provided:

- The combination of both [the principal researcher's] interest and background and the data [he] had access to was important and RAND provided theoretical guidance in designing the analysis.
- [The principal researcher] played a role in reviewing the RAND Louisiana study, so it was a two-way street.
- RAND's expertise and experience in getting into similar issues in Louisiana was a good match for trying to figure this out.
- RAND added expert consultation based on scientific and policy expertise and particular experience in carrying out the Louisiana study
- [The data analyst] was brought into the mix as a person who had prior knowledge of the data set—the data variables that would be used by USM.
- Had there been another person doing the analysis, it might have been more difficult, but [the data analyst] already had a good sense of the data and what it represented and how to do appropriate matching and keep things comparable.
- Once we (MDE) got into pulling some of the data, we realized the detail in which USM was needing the data. We knew how to do this—we spent probably three weeks worth of staff time here in my office going back and retroactively recreating all of those data at the required detail level.

Gaining Access to Data and Information

Multiple reflections by respondents indicated that access to information resources was a primary motivator in the development of this collaboration. Each of the individuals interviewed mentioned this need, and each acknowledged MDE as the repository for the student data needed

to conduct the study that was the core deliverable of the partnership. Only a few of the explicit comments are provided below, as they are very similar to other reflections.

- MDE had agreed to provide data collected on students that were considered to be displaced. Further, we'd look at demographics and performance information, specifically assessment data from the statewide testing program and attendance and expulsions.
- MDE was the initial owner of the data.
- MDE had access to the data, provided feedback on the analysis, and could anticipate possible impact on their policies.
- My understanding was that when Katrina hit, we didn't know what had happened to those students and we didn't know what the impact was going to be. We wanted [the study] to be based on data, and MDE had the data.

The response of one of the interviewees, while consistent with the theme of access to data as a motivational dimension of collaboration, offered additional insight into the reasons the access to student information in this instance might be useful. He expressed the belief that his agency (MDE) needed the benefit of more objective scrutiny of data that sheds light on the status of displaced students.

- We needed to be sure we could get valid information. More parties involved keeps folks honest. Sometimes you can get too close to the data and might try to explain away the problems that you see indicated by the data.

Making a Difference (Altruism)

While the interest in benefiting others through the study of students displaced by Katrina was not a predominant theme in the explicit comments of those questioned, it arose in a couple of the interviews. The articulation of this rationale for the collaboration seems worth noting, and the statements are provided below:

- We knew that MDE had the data and the interest—but probably not the time. There were so many other things they needed to do after the storm. They're our partners in so many other ways, so we thought we could help. We saw them as key customers.
- Hopeful of generating information on the plight of kids after the storm so that we could inform policy and action.
- We wanted to learn from the experience, but also if kids are still affected following the storm, we wanted people to understand that and develop strategies to deal with them.

Barriers to Interagency Collaboration

The second of the major themes is addressed extensively in the literature on interagency collaboration; it concerns barriers that either impede the progress of work within a collaborative venture or even dissuade prospective partners from entering such a process in the first place. The coding of responses generated additional sub-themes, which are elaborated in the following sections.

It is important to note that barriers to collaboration were often articulated by study participants based upon their potential and usually not on their actual or noteworthy materialization within the context of this joint project. Indeed, one of the research questions prompted respondents to reflect upon potential problems that were forecast at the inception of the partnership.

Misinterpreting/Misusing/Abusing Data

Four of the seven participants noted the potential for misinterpretation of the data on student behavior and achievement. None, however, indicated that such problems actually materialized in the course of the collaborative study.

The comments of these respondents relative to the potential for misuse of data are instructive.

- [MDE's] role was getting and processing the data and getting it into a format where researchers at USM could do their analysis.
- [The data analyst] already had a good sense of the data and what it represented and how to do appropriate matching and keep things comparable.
- Not getting the data right could have been an issue. MDE was good about not only explaining the data, but after we'd processed the data and were taking our first cuts at conclusions, they also picked up on a couple of problems in our interpretations.

One recounted less positive past collaboration experiences.

- The few other times we've worked with others this way, there was often misinterpretation, even misuse of data. It also took a lot of hand holding.

Misunderstanding Unique Terminology and Technologies

Terminology and technologies that are unique to a particular agency are potential barriers when multiple agencies begin to share information. Four of the seven participants offered comments that either explicitly or implicitly acknowledged the potential for such complications that existed within the implementation of the study of displaced students. Of these, none indicated that such problems actually occurred during the course of the collaborative study.

- We weren't completely sure about the translation of data into a usable format.

- One question on [MDE's] part was whether you'd understand what you had to work with.
- Also, the transfer of data between [the data analyst] and [the USM researchers]—we had to go through some trial and error to make sure what they were receiving was going to work for their analysis.
- [MDE] was concerned about that the flag indicating that students were displaced was a proxy—we hoped it would be reliable.
- I know that there was one issue that the MDE brought up as far as the definition of the displaced students was concerned.
- [The MCT grades 3-8 scale] is not a true vertical scale. Comparisons within group scale scores have to be viewed with caution. MDE debates whether there's a continuous scale, so be a little cautious with the interpretation.
- [MDE] had a couple of questions about the coding. The USDA designation is what seems to apply...but that's probably not a good read on true displacement. MIS was using a different set of codes. I'm assuming [the data analyst] used the codes provided by my office.

The fact that participants recognized the potential for problems around terminology and technologies, but did not perceive that such problems materialized during the study may be due in part to the selection of a data analyst with experience in working with the data sets used in the research. Two of the respondents reflected on the attributes of this person.

- There was an individual familiar with our data and available to work with you—that smoothed things quite a bit. We would have had to spend a lot more time really helping folks understand the data elements without that.

- It certainly was a big help that she had worked at MDE in my office for 5 years.

Sometimes it's difficult to get some of these concepts across if you're dealing with someone who's not familiar with the program.

Failing to Provide Resources

As has been noted previously, a typical motivation prompting organizations to partner with one another is the prospect of sharing resources. Participants in this study offered comments that address this issue. The most frequently cited concern dealt with the resources of time and data. Participant comments are instructive.

- We didn't expect it to be quite as much work. Once we took a look, we were not set up to answer the questions.
- I knew from my experience at a state agency that having people in charge of assessment data to carve out time to meet the data demands of a project like this—one to which they might even be sympathetic philosophically—would be hard.
- It's a little bit of a problem when you have to go back to pull a piece of data or extract from the system what's needed. It would be more efficient to have that all in the beginning, but it's probably not that much more work.
- I know we had some issues of getting files back and forth between [the data analyst] and MDE and [the researchers]. We had to work out some issues of format and that type thing. But we resolved it in a timely manner and it didn't have any negative effect on the final analysis.
- Initially we had to wait on IRB approval. But again, that's a formality. And then we got a request a couple of times that we may not have been able to turn it around the same day but again we tried to be as responsive as possible.

- The amount of time needed and some problems in the data—these were issues.
- I knew how hard it is for professors to sit down and carve out time to research and write.

Failing to Anticipate Policy Barriers

Another potential barrier to collaboration is the constraint of statutes, policies, and regulations that guide processes within organizations. Policy language designed to protect student privacy rights are an example of a specific potential policy barrier to partnerships that include education organizations. The partners in this instance were constrained from providing any data that would make the identification of individual students possible. Data in many instances were provided in the form of school district averages or statewide mean scores. While this was not a prevalent issue among respondents, it came up in two instances and is worth noting.

- The biggest problem anticipated was being allowed to hand off the data.
- The lack of access to individual student data was an issue—while we surely understand the reasons, differences aren't as easy to detect in district means and summary proportions.

Enablers of Interagency Collaboration

The third of the major themes was not part of the original categorical structure for coding data; rather, it emerged during the coding of data. Just as there are barriers to interagency collaboration, there are also enablers—factors that enhance the process and products of partnerships. While the researcher observed many of these factors in the examination the literature on barriers (such obstacles were often posed as the absence or failure to fulfill these dimensions of partnership), the coding suggested that these enablers are not always simply the

inverse of barriers. Thus, the elaboration of another major theme—enablers to interagency collaboration—seemed warranted. The coding of responses also generated additional sub-themes, which are elaborated in the following sections.

Assuring Effective Communication

The quality of communication among participants in multi-agency partnerships is of significant importance. Four of the seven respondents in this instance addressed communication. Some of their comments are provided below:

- As we've done the analysis new questions have come up, additional information was needed. We had to talk this stuff through and go through additional processes to obtain the data or extract them from the MDE system.
- All three parties were aware of the way the students had been identified. It was discussed among the three entities and everyone agreed that this was a valid definition.
- You kept [the state superintendent and associate state superintendent] informed at a reasonable level, with reasonable frequency—and also at appropriate times.

Shouldering the Load

Two of the respondents offered observations indicating that the willingness of persons in their agencies and the partner agencies to assume an appropriate share of responsibility and the workload was important to the fulfillment of the study of displaced students. Their comments are profiled below:

- The complementary nature of what each had to offer worked well. We weren't stepping on each others' toes, but we each were contributing something useful.

- We appreciated MDE going the extra mile on gathering and sometimes reformatting the data. The money from RAND helped immeasurably.

Attending to the Relational Dimensions of Interaction

Respondents frequently addressed the relational attributes of the collaborative processes associated with this study.

- USM was in the region, had relationships with key people who could gain access to the data. USM understood the data and its context.
- Relationships were a factor to some degree. It's not like we have this strong institutional bond between MDE and USM, but USM is a state institution and we know many of the individuals there, so there is a relationship.
- We had common interests in the K-12 world. Relationships with faculty perhaps heightened the willingness in a way that may not have been true with every potential university partner.
- [The researchers] and I hit it off. We had a good rapport, a good understanding of what one another is trying to do with the data.
- I believe that the collaboration between me and MDE was a very valuable asset to the whole process...So I believe there was a great collaboration.

Developing rapport and attending to the relational issues that are inherent in such collaborative ventures is certainly important. However, respondents went on to address unique relational dimensions of this particular partnership, which included the facilitating effect of pre-existing relationships among the participants.

- [The researcher's] initiation of the dialogue with MDE was pretty important. If just RAND had showed up, it wouldn't have been the same. [MDE] doesn't know those

people. We know their work, but when you don't know them, there's a natural hesitancy.

- [The data analyst] was someone [MDE] had worked with; we knew her and could trust her. She understands [MDE] and our needs. But she could also meet USM's needs. Without her it wouldn't have been as smooth.
- Relationships, relationships, relationships! [The data analyst] knew and had worked with our key data contacts at MDE. [The principal researcher] knew and had collaborated with the state superintendent on other issues; he and [the associate state superintendent] were former colleagues.
- It just made sense. We knew one another. [The researcher] knew [RAND's] work.

Demonstrating Sensitivity/Adaptability

A sub-theme that is related to the above mentioned relational dimensions of interagency collaboration is the degree to which partners demonstrate sensitivity and adaptability.

Respondents in the present inquiry acknowledged that concerns are likely to arise in circumstances in which organizations adopt a joint project and share resources to accomplish it. Each of the seven individuals offered comments suggesting that sensitivity and adaptability were positive dimensions of the collaboration at those junctures where problems arose in the study of the behavior and achievement of displaced students. A sample of comments is instructive.

- There were no deal-breakers; we worked things out.
- Additional data needs arose, but that wasn't a problem. That's sort of typical. You rarely think of everything you'll need at the beginning, even though you try to be fairly exhaustive.
- We understood at the outset about some stuff not being foreseeable.

- I didn't really see any issues with the parties collaborating.
- I don't think there were any problems. Initially we had to wait on IRB approval. But again, that's a formality.
- I'm not aware of any problems at all.
- We didn't expect it to be quite as much work. It turned out to be quite a bit more trouble than we thought. There were 3500 data columns. We didn't mind at all. It's part of the natural occurrence with any project.
- There were issues that needed to be worked out but I wasn't aware of anything that was flawed.

Benefits of Interagency Collaboration

The fourth of the major themes identified in the examination of the literature on interagency collaboration were the perceived benefits that accrue when one or more organizations seek the partnership of others. Coding of responses led to the identification of multiple sub-themes, which are described in the following sections and elaborated through participants' comments.

Sharing Resources and Efficiently Using Resources

Several respondents discussed the degree to which the sharing of resources benefited the study of displaced students. Six of the seven offered specific comments, some of which are profiled below:

- [MDE] pulled together the data.
- The arrangement of USM taking on the heavy lifting of analysis—I think that was extremely beneficial. You needed money for data gathering and expenses. RAND heard what we were up to and offered to help.

- USM had the ability and the will to analyze the data.
- RAND was there with funding support and expertise.

One observer implied that the sharing of resources was particularly useful in the wake of a large-scale disaster.

- We don't regularly deal with such a catastrophe. We needed to partner to find out the type of impact on students, both short term and long term.

Generating Useful Products

Perhaps the most extensive commentary from participants attended questions that addressed the outputs of the partnership to study to the behavior and achievement of students displaced by Hurricane Katrina. Each of the seven respondents commented on both the utility of the products and on the potential of these products to influence policy and action. The following sample observations provide an overall sense of participant perspectives on whether the study generated products and whether these products were useful:

- Yes. There are two classes of results. There's the potential for it to be useful in learning what happens to people in a disaster of this magnitude. It also tells us what to prepare for in future crisis situations.
- With respect to education, it should inform us with respect to the effects of student mobility on kids and schools.
- That's sort of in process. It's a good two-year picture. The data are pretty helpful, they give us a pretty good idea of what's happening with these students. That will be probably be informative to folks. They may already know, but it may help raise some awareness, particularly in districts that have large numbers or proportions of these students.

- I think it might open people's eyes to the fact that a lot of these students may need some follow-up. It would not have been the case had it not been for the storm and the resulting family dynamics that occurred.
- Giving [MDE] something like the PowerPoint is fairly succinct—it's really the most useful to us. Others want and need the detail.

Three of the seven respondents qualified their statements on product utility. The following statements are instructive:

- But I don't know if a PowerPoint and paper are sufficient. You may need a dog and pony show to go around to audiences.
- Yes, but in part, [the utility] is yet to be determined. It depends on what people do with it. The jury is out on whether the products are useful.
- The information is potentially useful, but it depends on whether you change the conversation about kids who were affected by the storm.
- I think we had hopes that what we found out with individual states could lead to a multi-state analysis. But based on this, it looked as though that would have limited utility and would be very expensive.

The following comments address the potential of the products to impact policy and action:

- It will definitely add to the literature on the impact of disasters. Other utility depends on things like the willingness of the key policy making collaborator (MDE) to use it in policy and action processes.
- Beyond that I think it probably has implications, particular on the behavioral issues.
- There are big and, hopefully not, potentially similar events like this that will occur in the future. It could be another hurricane or tornado or earthquake. They could be large

- catastrophic events or localized. This could help inform folks about what happens, especially when we have the additional comparison with what happened in Louisiana.
- The results show gaps between displaced and non-displaced in all different fashions: attendance, suspensions expulsions, and dropout data. I would think that MDE would want to analyze that to see what types of things could be done in the future for kids that are falling in those gap areas.
 - People say ‘let’s get back to normal—we don’t need more training. These kids just need to suck it up and deal with it.’ There have to be strategies or we’re not going to be successful. The public needs to acknowledge that it’s an issue that requires public resources.
 - This should influence policy and action in several places. Closing gaps—these kids are disproportionately poor and minority. Behavioral, counseling, and mental health supports.
 - Not the last storm we’ll have. As other states experience disasters they can use the information to be proactive.

Discussion

There is great consistency between much of the literature on interagency collaboration and the observations of individuals involved in the partnership of three agencies to support a study of the behavior of students displaced by Hurricane Katrina. The following sections address such conclusions.

Motivation for and Nature of Interagency Collaboration

The literature on interagency collaboration addresses the motivations and nature of interagency collaboration. Being unable to easily complete projects on their own is one of the

reasons that organizations seek partners. The observations of participants in this study are consistent with this theme. In this instance of collaboration, it appears that a key motivator was the widely held belief that the participation of multiple parties was necessary to accomplish the study. It is an interesting side note that the research proposal was initiated by the university—this is consistent with patterns in studies of school-university partnerships. Gaining access to the expertise of persons in other agencies is also a rationale for interagency collaboration that is cited frequently in the relevant literature. The observations of participants in this study suggest that such interests were central in the development of the multi-organization partnership.

As indicated by writers who address such issues, access to data and information is a frequently cited rationale for multi-agency collaboration. The statements of the participants in this study reinforced the conclusions in extant literature. The need for data and information was a compelling rationale for partnership. Studies and professional perspective publications allude in many instances, although often implicitly, to altruistic intentions as motivators for interagency partnerships. The observations of the participants in the present study reinforce such conclusions. The intent to serve a benevolent purpose is, for some, a compelling reason to seek partnerships.

Barriers to Interagency Collaboration

The literature on interagency collaboration offers extensive illustration of barriers to collaboration among organizations. Information and data housed in one agency's information systems can be useful; indeed, as reported in participant commentary and previous research, it is often a key motivator in the initiation of the partnership and essential to the fulfillment of partnership goals. However, the literature indicates that misinterpretation and abuse of such data are not uncommon in interagency partnerships. The explicit past concerns of one respondent in the current study and the concerns over the potential for such misuse of data that are implicit in

the observations of the others reinforce the notion that this is a significant potential barrier in multi-agency partnerships. The consensus of respondents, however, was that such problems did not arise in the current collaboration.

Many authors note the difficulties produced by unique terminology and technologies within organizations that seek to collaborate. Education, for example, is a jargon-rich enterprise. The observations of individuals involved in this partnership indicate an awareness of this potential, and thus are consistent with the literature on this topic. The gist of these comments, however, indicates that such issues, when they arose, were readily resolved in the study of displaced students.

The literature mentions with some frequency the barriers to partnership that are erected when participating organizations do not follow through on original commitments of resources nor respond to emerging requests for new resources. Responses of participants in this instance suggest that the potential for such concerns is real and that resource concerns do arise in the course of partnership activities, thus reinforcing previous research on such barriers. The consensus of respondents was that, while resource demands were in some instances considerable, commitments were adequately fulfilled. Policy issues and jurisdictional constraints are not uncommon when organizations, particularly government agencies, seek to collaborate. The comments of participants were consistent with the literature concerning such barriers and acknowledged that, in a few isolated instances, such problems materialized in this study.

It is important to note that barriers to collaboration were often articulated by study participants based upon their potential and usually not on their actual or noteworthy materialization within the context of this joint project. Indeed, one of the research questions prompted respondents to reflect upon potential problems that were forecast at the inception of the

partnership and another asked whether any features of the collaboration had not worked well. While there were a number of comments that addressed barriers, each of the participants included in his/her response to these questions observations that indicated that, while they recognized potential problems and observed some actual difficulties during implementation of the study, these were not significant issues.

Enablers of Interagency Collaboration

While the theme of enablers was not originally part of the categorical structure for coding participant responses, it suggested itself during the coding process. The literature on interagency partnerships identified communication among the partners as a factor that impacts the quality of collaboration. The observations of participants in the present study reinforce this notion. Previous research also reinforced elements of the literature that suggest that perceptions of the degree to which partners fulfill their responsibilities for a project impact both process and outcomes in collaboration. Observations by participants indicated that these obligations were fulfilled in the current partnership.

The impact of the relational dimensions of interagency collaboration is addressed extensively in previous research. The comments of participants in the present study are consistent with the literature. These observations also addressed pre-existing relationships that enhanced interpersonal dynamics within this partnership. Relational dimensions, including trust, are key determinants to the quality of process and outputs in multi-organization partnerships.

The literature did not make frequent explicit reference to sensitivity and adaptability as facilitating factors in multi-organization partnerships; however, the extensive commentary of these participants suggests that these variables are by no means immaterial to the process and outcomes of interagency collaboration. The initial elements of these comments, even when

followed by descriptions of potential or actual difficulties within the context of the study, were uniformly optimistic. The researcher acknowledges that there may have been an element of politeness in such observations that masked deeper concerns. He was, after all, both the principal researcher in the study of displaced students and the interviewer in the examination of the collaboration that yielded that study. However, these initial observations by respondents were typically substantiated by elaborations that lent sincerity to them.

Benefits of Interagency Collaboration

Previous research on interagency collaboration is replete with observations and analysis of the utility of such partnerships. Participants in the present study reflected on the benefits of this partnership. For example, the sharing of resources is a significant benefit of multi-organization partnerships; respondents noted the sharing of data, funding, and expertise in research and analysis. There is also literature that suggests that the benefits are more pronounced during a time of crisis. The observations of the participants in the present study reinforce previous research regarding resource sharing.

Generating useful products is cited often as a justification for and outcome of interagency collaboration. The extensive commentary of participants in this study is consistent with extant literature in that it acknowledges the usefulness of the products and the potential for impacting policy and action. Such serviceability is not automatic, however, and the comments of some participants suggest that the utility of the products ultimately will depend upon actions yet to be taken by both researchers and targeted recipients of the products.

Implications

An acknowledged limitation of qualitative designs is the constraint on generalization of findings to other contexts. The researcher proceeds to the discussion of implications with a healthy

awareness that his observations on any transferability of findings from the present study need to be viewed with some caution. It is further recognized that in a qualitative research context, it is the reader who may be best able to discern those findings that are useful in other circumstances.

With these caveats noted, the present findings suggest a number of implications for practice in the area of multi-agency collaboration. Since motivations for collaboration vary, but uniformly include interests in resource sharing and certain products, prospective partners are wise to give considerable attention to both the desired outcome of the joint venture and the specific types of resource commitments needed from each agency to assure that the goals are realized. Thoughtful elaboration of the roles and expectations for each partner will also stand a collaborative venture in good stead.

Since interagency collaboration sometimes involves novel problem/solution scenarios, partners are well-advised to enter the ventures with an acknowledgement that unknown challenges are likely to arise. Formalizing at least some of the processes for resolving such dilemmas is useful in advance of the actual occurrence of these challenges. Similarly, acknowledging the need for and committing to civility and flexibility can be useful. Given the potential for misinterpretation and even abuse of data and information, prior formalized agreements concerning joint authorship, custody of results, and conditions for release of information may be useful.

The impact of the relational dimensions of interagency collaboration needs particular emphasis. Attending to the communication of progress and needs of partners is important. Particular sensitivity to the recipient and medium are important. The communication vehicle for analysts will be different than the vehicle for agency heads, as will the frequency and the formative versus summative nature of the content presented.

A unique feature of the relational context in this study was the number of personal relationships that pre-existed the organizational collaboration. While it certainly stretches the bounds of pragmatism to suggest that individuals in agencies should invest huge amounts of time in indiscriminately courting individuals in other agencies whose partnership might become useful in some as yet unforeseen fashion, there is wisdom to the lobbyist adage that it is wise to “invest time in making friends before you need them.” Schools and education agencies are aware of the organizations with which they share similar responsibilities and interests. University faculty likewise are aware of the agencies that have access to school data and responsibilities/interests related to P-12 education. These organizations provide a starting point for the sort of networking that may pay relational dividends in future partnerships.

Finally (and this is truly the editorial posture of the authors), it appears to the researcher that partnerships gain traction when the goal of the collaboration is, at least in part, altruistic in nature. The interest in and concern for students impacted by a catastrophe of Katrina’s magnitude strengthened the persistence, expanded the patience, and enhanced the generosity of the parties to this process. In the words of one respondent, “It was one of those things—it was coming out of everybody’s hide—[RAND] didn’t have extra time to work on this. [MDE and USM] didn’t have time to work on this. You had a little bit of money to get some data help, but probably not enough. That’s a sign of good collaboration—when folks are engaged because they want to be.”

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