Accountability in Collaboration: A Framework for Evaluation

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Abstract: Accountability is perhaps the most significant issue facing educators today. How can school professionals document that their work results in significant positive outcomes? This issue is especially critical to the many special and general educators moving into collaborative partnerships, given the dramatic shifts in their professional roles inherent in this move. A 2 × 2 “Collaboration Evaluation Matrix” outlines two basic types of information (objective and subjective) and two basic dimensions of any program (processes and outcomes) that might be considered in evaluation of collaboration. Multiple data sources enhance validity and utility of these evaluation efforts.

One of the most dramatic recent developments in American education has been the increasing call for “teacher accountability” from various constituencies of the public schools. Many political leaders are questioning enhancing financial resources provided to schools without tangible assurances that teachers are indeed effective in their work.

To more effectively respond to changing student characteristics and needs, both general and special educators are incorporating a variety of significant structural changes into their work. One especially promising approach is a higher degree of professional sharing among teachers; that is, educational collaboration (Pugach & Johnson, 2002).

Collaboration is defined as “... an ongoing style of professional interaction in which school professionals voluntarily engage in shared (a) program planning, (b) program implementation, (c) program evaluation, and (d) program accountability” (Hourcade & Bauwens, 2003, p. 7). Unfortunately, in evaluating the effectiveness of collaboration there is not always consensus on either what should be measured, or how it should be measured.

Understanding Program Evaluation

McLaughlin and McLaughlin (1993) provided a useful framework for thinking about evaluation. Evaluation is a process through which information is collected that allows people to make comparisons with predetermined standards. Evaluation plans must begin with a specific purpose (or purposes) of the evaluation in mind. In this, evaluators should be able to answer two questions.

• Who are potential consumers of information to be generated by the evaluation?
• What is it those consumers should know?

Possible consumers of information about a school’s implementation of professional collaboration include:

• parents
• educators presently involved in collaboration
• educators not presently involved in collaboration
• professors in teacher preparation programs at universities
• staff development professionals and educational consultants in school districts or educational support centers
• educational administrators
• state legislators
• educational researchers
All of these potential users have different questions they would like answered through evaluations of collaboration. Identification of primary recipients of evaluation results is the first step in design of a functional system for program evaluation.

Evaluating Collaboration

One way to conceptualize evaluation of collaboration is to think about how homeowners might evaluate a home remodeling project. First, during construction work, the homeowner might monitor whether each different subcontracted jobs (e.g., electrical, flooring, painting) is being done as agreed upon. In addition, after the work has been completed, the homeowner might check to see that results (e.g., dimensions, specifications) that were decided upon beforehand actually were achieved. In this process the homeowner evaluated what was being done, as well as an after-the-fact evaluation of the results or outcomes. These two types of evaluations are processes evaluation, and outcomes evaluation.

In addition, in doing this evaluation the homeowner may objectively measure such things as the quality ratings and the number of coats of paint, whether windows are the correct size as agreed to beforehand, and so forth. In addition to this objective data, however, the homeowner usually develops a subjective sense of whether the selected colors actually feel as pleasant as was expected, whether window size is providing the sense of airiness that was hoped for, and so on. In doing both types of examinations the homeowner is conducting analyses of both the objective and subjective dimensions.

Thus, one way to think about evaluating collaboration is to conceptualize a $2 \times 2$ matrix with four cells, each containing a different type of information. One half of the matrix includes the two types of information that might be collected: objective information (conclusions based on impersonal data) or subjective information (conclusions based on personal perceptions). The other half includes two specific dimensions of the evaluation: (a) the processes that are being used in the program and (b) the outcomes of those processes. As illustrated in Figure 1, this $2 \times 2$ matrix yields four possible types of data that might be generated in an evaluation of collaboration:

- objective analyses of the processes of collaboration
- objective analyses of the outcomes of collaboration
- subjective analyses of the processes of collaboration
- subjective analyses of the outcomes of collaboration

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Figure 1. Data type matrix in collaboration evaluation.
Objective Versus Subjective Information

In beginning evaluation of collaboration, educators must decide whether the evaluation will be based on objective (impersonal and empirically-derived) information, subjective (personal perception and opinion) information, or some combination of both. Each has potential advantages, and contributes significant perspectives.

Objective data. Objective information consists of observable data uninfluenced by personal opinion. For example, in evaluating the planning component of collaboration, evaluators might learn from written records that the partners in collaboration had met every week for the last three months. These data would be identical for any observer, and are only minimally subject to personal interpretation. Other possible types of objective data might include:

- number of hours the two educators actually spent collaborating in the same classroom
- standardized test scores of students in classrooms where collaboration was implemented compared to those not so taught
- time spent in training for collaboration
- amount of money spent to support collaboration

Subjective data. Subjective information, while often less clear-cut, can provide valuable insights not available through more objective databases. Subjective evaluation often includes asking significant individuals to record their personal impressions of various aspects of the program, typically using a Likert-type scale. These scales provide a number of items to which respondents give their reaction by indicating their degree of agreement or disagreement with statements made. Often these evaluation incorporate a 1 to 5 scale wherein “1” indicates strong agreement with an item, while a “5” indicates strong disagreement.

Subjective data might be gathered on both educator and student perceptions of a variety of aspects of collaboration, including the following:

- quality and effectiveness of help that students who are struggling receive
- perceived clarity of lessons that are presented
- overall level of personal and professional satisfaction of the educators engaged in collaboration
- overall level of personal and professional satisfaction of their students

For example, educators participating in collaboration might respond to an item that says, “I learned new instructional strategies from my partner.” If the average score for this item among the respondents is 4.4 (with a “1” indicating strong agreement and a “5” indicating strong disagreement), then one might conclude that the collaborative potential for participants to learn from one another is not being fully achieved. In addition, one might also sum up all scores from each respondent to obtain an overall subjective sense of how effective the processes have been, and to gain an understanding of how favorably any particular respondent feels overall about collaboration.

Neither objective nor subjective evaluative information alone provides an accurate analysis of the effectiveness of collaboration. The combination of both objective and subjective information yields the most comprehensive representation.

Process Evaluation Versus Outcomes Evaluation

Many educators have had the experience of implementing some program that was described as “can’t miss,” going through the prescribed training and subsequent instructions and procedures exactly as specified, only to find the results disappointing, discouraging, or unsuccessful. Given the inexact nature of education, it simply is not possible to develop a school program that possesses absolute specificity and predictability of results.

For evaluative purposes, it may be useful to distinguish between two distinct dimensions of collaboration. These are (a) the individual component processes that in total comprise the program, and (b) the resulting outcomes of the implementation of collaboration. Evaluation of both these dimensions may be necessary.

Process evaluation. To be useful to others, a successful program should be replicable. This requires the implementers to clearly identify for others specific steps, procedures and pro-
cesses that they followed. Given this, one approach toward evaluating collaboration is to identify and evaluate various component processes involved in it. For example, evaluators might base their analysis in part on an examination of such agreed-upon processes as frequency of planning for collaboration, productivity of those sessions in generating practical plans, and so forth.

At its simplest level, process evaluation involves two steps. First, evaluators must identify and agree upon the component processes inherent in the program. Second, those identified processes are then evaluated.

*Outcomes evaluation.* School professionals design and implement new programs to respond to some perceived needs that presently are unmet, and to achieve some desired result. Evaluation of any program should determine how well these needs were met, and to what extent the desired outcomes were achieved. Typically collaboration is designed to achieve both objective and subjective outcomes. Thus the evaluation of *outcomes* may incorporate objective information, subjective information, or both.

For example, a collaborative effort may be designed and implemented in part to provide students with more effective instruction in basic academic skills. Measures of success of that goal might include such objective data as school-wide scores on standardized achievement tests, informal reading inventories, and curriculum-based assessment measures. However, another desired outcome of the implementation of collaboration might be to facilitate a greater sense of camaraderie among educators at that school, a feeling that they all share the same goal (for example, the effective education of all students in that school). Evaluating this personally subjective outcome might require the construction of a Likert-type scale. (Sample item: “After having participated in collaboration, I now believe that I have greater professional responsibility for all students at this school.”) Individual participants’ responses to this item can yield an emerging data base from which to judge whether the desired outcome of shared responsibility among all educators is being achieved through the collaboration program.

It is typical for a program to show greater success with some of these types of data than with others. The relative weight and importance of each of the four categories of data should be determined before the evaluation begins.

**Determining Sources of Information**

Evaluation of collaboration should be guided primarily by a review of those factors that led educators to adopt a collaborative model in the first place. One way to begin is to group all possible sources of information into four general categories. These four categories are (a) students, (b) the educational system, (c) professional educators, and (d) parents and other outside parties.

*Student Information*  
A near-universal theme in the professional literature is that the fundamental purpose of school restructuring must be enhancement of student learning (e.g., Barr & Parrett, 2001; Elmore, Peterson, & McCarthy, 1996; Neumann & Wehlage, 1995). The primacy of student outcomes as a foundation for evaluating the effectiveness of collaboration is difficult to argue. Student outcomes might include both subjective and objective sources of information.

*Objective student information.* Policy makers throughout the country increasingly are asking that schools be held “accountable” for their work. Frequently that accountability is defined as objective data from state-mandated student achievement assessment scores (e.g., Barr & Parrett, 2001). Objective quantitative data are often easier for evaluators to collect than are subjective data. Objective data may also carry greater weight with initially skeptical audiences, especially with individuals who are not directly involved in education.

Objective sources of information can be obtained from students who are participating in cooperatively taught programs, and compared to that obtained from similar students who are not participating in these programs. Possible sources of objective student information include:

- standardized test scores
• passing rates on tests required for moving from grade to grade
• curriculum-based measurement results
• grades on homework, tests, and other educator-based evaluations of student performance
• proportions of assignments completed
• observations of rates of social interactions
• observations of rates of on-task and other academic behaviors
• mastery of IEP goals and objectives for students receiving special education services

Subjective student information. Subjective sources of information might include development of a Likert-type scale to be given to students. Such an instrument might include such items as:

• “Collaboration is helping me learn how to study better.”
• “When both teachers are in the room our class has to slow down more for kids who are having trouble learning.”
• “I think other teachers should come into our class to help kids who need help, instead of the kids leaving our class for help.”

This instrument could then be given to all students who are involved in teachers collaborating to ascertain how these changes are perceived by the students.

Educational System Information

In addition to better meeting student needs, many schools implement collaborative arrangements to respond to perceived problems in the way contemporary schools are structured. For example, many educators express concern about the level of physical, social, and professional isolation from their colleagues that they experience. Thus, a second source of information about the impact of collaboration is its impact on the overall school and educational system.

Objective system information. There are a variety of objective data sources that can be reviewed to evaluate impact of collaboration on the overall educational system. These include:

• frequency of suspensions, expulsions, and similar behavior-management interventions
• absenteeism and dropout rates
• retention rates
• numbers of students on IEPs
• numbers of students removed from the general classroom for segregated support services (e.g., Chapter 1, special education, speech and language, gifted and talented)

Subjective system information. Subjective and personal opinions on effects of collaboration on the educational system can be solicited from a variety of professionals. These include general education teachers, support services providers, and/or administrators. A Likert-type scale developed to gather this information might include items such as:

• “Fewer students ‘fall through the cracks’ in classes where collaboration is implemented.”
• “Collaboration is less effective than our present arrangements in preventing small problems from becoming large ones.”
• “Collaboration represents a less efficient use of our time than the present system.”
• “Collaboration makes it more difficult to maintain consistent communications with parents.”

Educator Information

A third type of information about collaboration is its impact on the professionals providing educational services in the schools. Some of these individuals include:

• general and special educators
• school administrators
• Chapter 1 teachers
• gifted and talented teachers
• related services providers (e.g., speech, occupational, and physical therapists)
• school psychologists and counselors
• paraprofessionals, teacher aides, and instructional assistants

Objective educator information. Objective data also may be gathered on the impact of collaboration on the professionals in the schools. Potential types of data include:

• educator burnout/retention rates
Each school will have specific educator-based objective data that can provide effective indicators of the effects of collaboration on its professional staff.

Subjective educator information. Subjective information gathered from educators can provide valuable information on effects of collaboration on participants. Specific questions to be used in the scale might be based on those factors that led to the decision to implement collaboration in the first place. A Likert-type scale for these respondents might include such subjective items as:

- “I enjoy collaboration more than I enjoyed working by myself.”
- “I believe I have lost some degree of professional independence since beginning collaboration.”
- “I now am spending more time in planning than I was before I began collaboration.”
- “Collaboration allows me to make better use of my unique teaching and professional skills.”
- “After working in collaboration I now believe students with disabilities can succeed in general classrooms.”
- “I feel more stress working under collaboration than I did under the previous system.”

Parent and General Public Information

One of the hallmarks of the 2000 presidential campaign was the extraordinarily high profile of public education. Seldom has education been such a large issue in national elections. For better or worse, the public schools are under great scrutiny by both politicians as well as society at large.

From the perspective of many in society, the educational system must be held more accountable to the public. The recent growing emphasis on high-stakes testing is perhaps the most dramatic evidence of this development. Many would assert that primary emphasis of the schools should be to graduate an educated and literate citizenry.

It is understandable that educators are being asked to be accountable to the major stakeholders in the schools. Significance of evaluating the impact of collaboration upon these individuals should not be overlooked. Major stakeholders include:

- parents of students
- members of parent–teacher organizations
- school board members
- politicians
- employers
- other citizens in the community

As is the case with other sources of information on the impact of collaboration, both objective and subjective parent and general public information can be useful.

Objective parent and general public information. Objective data on effects of collaboration on these individuals might include information such as:

- attendance at parent-teacher meetings
- rates of responsiveness to school messages sent home
- attendance rates at IEP meetings
- voting patterns of school board members and politicians

Subjective parent and general public information. Subjective data on perceptions of the impact of collaboration can be gathered through Likert-type scales completed by these individuals. For example, after parents have gathered some experience with implementation of collaboration in their children’s school, a survey of parents could include such items as:

- “Students with special needs are not likely to have their needs best met in the general classroom, even when a support services provider is there.”
“My child is best educated in a classroom characterized by diversity.”

“Collaboration may be effective for less able students but is not as good for the more able students.”

“I believe that collaboration allows all children to receive a better education.”

Summary and Conclusions

Any change process, including implementation of professional collaboration in schools, will proceed most smoothly and with the greatest success when the participants have determined beforehand (a) the desired outcomes, and (b) how those outcomes will be measured. Change agents implementing collaborative programs must begin by identifying those individuals to whom they will be providing evaluative information about collaboration, and determining what it is they need to know.

Next, individuals evaluating collaboration should decide what dimensions are to be evaluated: the processes involved in collaboration, the outcomes of collaboration, or both. The evaluation of either dimension may use objective or subjective data, generating four different types of data. The final stage in planning for collaboration evaluation is identification of possible sources of information. Four possibilities include students, the overall educational system, professional educators, and parents and other outside parties.

In order to effectively interpret data there must be at least two sets of data to provide some point of comparison. Thus evaluations of collaboration might be conducted at least twice. This would include one prior to the implementation of collaboration, and a second at some point after implementation. Additional subsequent and ongoing evaluations will provide an even better picture of how impact of the collaborative program is evolving over time.

Evaluation work to ascertain impact of collaboration on schools will be even more effective if used on an ongoing and proactive basis to shape and determine future efforts. School professionals who evaluate their collaborative work consistently and comprehensively will be best positioned to respond to mounting calls for accountability in American education.

References


