Collaborations in Early Care and Education: Establishing a Framework for a Research Agenda Conference
May 24-25, 2010
Washington, DC

Sharon Lynn Kagan, Ed.D.
Teachers College, Columbia University
Presentation Overview

- Looking Back, Quickly
- What We Must Know, Not-So-Quickly
  - Boundaries for the Monster
  - What’s Magic
  - Getting Real
  - Discerning the Endgame
  - On the Mark
Part I: 
Looking Back, Quickly
Looking Back: Defining It

- Collaboration comes from the Latin words, *com* and *labora*, meaning “coming together in labor” (Hemmelman, 1996)
- Relationship where two or more entities come together to work on a joint effort (Huxman, 1996; Jordan & Michel, 2000; Kerka, 1997)
- Relationship where “appreciations and/or resources” are pooled to achieve what one could not achieve alone (Gray, 1989)
Looking Back: Applying It

• As such, collaboration is a slippery construct, applied, in our field, to diverse entities:
  – **Across systems**: Health, Mental Health, Nutrition; Family Support; Early Learning; Special Needs
  – **Across programs** that provide core early learning services (e.g., child care, pre-kindergarten, Head Start)
  – **Across diverse ministries or departments** that oversee the programs (DOEs, DHHS)
  – **Across or within a single state or field** that is set up to coordinate services (e.g., councils, partnerships, alliances, networks; Bailey and Koney, 2000)
  – **Across classrooms**: as in two teachers sharing materials or groups of children
Looking Back: Imaging It
Looking Back: Distinguishing It

- Conceptualized collaboration as the third and most critical tier of a set of accepted interaction
- Was a time of polite, but skeptical cooperation
- ACYS prohibited braiding (co-mingling) of funds
Looking Back: Theorizing About It

• Lawson (2004):
  – Collaborations among professionals
  – Collaborations among professionals and citizens
  – Collaborations among organizational and government systems

• Leidtika (1996):
  – Metacapability tool
  – Builds and transfers capacity

• Hardy, Lawrence, & Phillips (2002):
  – Creates protoinstitutions
  – New entities with own rules, practices, and technologies
Looking Back: Terming It

• In quest for clarity, have tried to borrow constructs that concretize it:
  – Language of *business and industry*: merger and acquisition
  – Language of the *bureaucrats*: services/systems integration
  – Language of the *optimists*: partnerships
  – Language of the *oppressed*: power-broking
Looking Back: Understanding It

• **VERB:** To collaborate
  – Suggests that it includes the work that people do, the process they undertake, the relationships they do and don’t establish

• **NOUN:** Collaboration
  – Suggests that these processes are usually fortified by some structure (e.g., council, organization, alliance)
Part II: What We Must Know, Not-So-Quickly
What We MUST Know 1

**PREMISE:** You can’t research or assess what you can’t define
- Need some conceptual work on what precisely we are measuring
- If we use “collaboration” to describe a process, then it could apply to lots of different kinds of collaborations that are different (councils, advisory committees, governance entities, partnerships)
- What distinguishes these and does it matter?
- Is there a transcendent unit of analysis?

**WWMK 1:** “The Monster needs some boundaries!”

**RESEARCH QUESTION 1:** What IS collaboration and what distinguishes it from other forms of partnerships?

**RESEARCH QUESTION 1A:** Can you study a process, independent of the structures that frame it?
**PREMISE:** Some things make some “collaborations” more successful than others, and this magical “I gotta-get-me-some” elixir is worth knowing

–Despite the reality that collaborations exist for diverse purposes in diverse contexts, we continue to think that there are potent and *common* processes that can be known and shared
–Need honesty about what we really can adapt across contexts/purposes
–Need to understand if researching and knowing will have any potential downsides. Greater expectations from admittedly fragile entities?

**WWMK 2:** “What’s the magic, for whom and under what conditions?”

**RESEARCH QUESTION 2:** What are the process characteristics that make collaborations effective?

**RESEARCH QUESTION 2A:** How replicable are they?

**RESEARCH QUESTION 2B:** Must they exist over time or are certain characteristics more potent at one time (e.g., start-up) than at other time/s?
PREMISE: We can empirically research what makes a difference

- Is what we want and need to know about process really knowable and measurable?
- Milbrey McLaughlin argues that you can’t measure what really matters (e.g., love, happiness)

WWMK 3: “Let’s get real!!”

RESEARCH QUESTION 3: Do we have the research tools and methodologies to measure collaborations’ important process variables, like trust and understanding?
**What We MUST Know 4**

**PREMISE:** The process of adult and organizational collaboration impacts children’s outcomes

- Do we really believe that a diffuse, often irregular process like collaboration can make a difference in child outcomes?
- Would collaborations be worthwhile if they only demonstrated process outcomes?
- What are the range of collaborative outcomes that we should consider (e.g., cost efficiencies, redundancy elimination)?

**WWMK 4:** “What’s the real (and appropriate) endgame?”

**RESEARCH QUESTION 4:** What is and should be the desire outcome of collaborative efforts?

**RESEARCH QUESTION 4A:** To, and for what, should collaborations be held accountable?

**RESEARCH QUESTION 4B:** What is the criteria for effectiveness?
What We MUST Know 5

**PREMISE:** Collaborations are generally loosely configured, and are highly context and person dependent. As such, their life potency is highly varied

– Is it a passé construct? In an era of mandated accountability, performance measurement, does collaboration’s mettle still hold?
– In 2010 and beyond, is collaboration still the right metric?
– Is it potent enough to get early childhood where it needs and wants to go?

**WWMK 5:** “Are we on the mark?”

**RESEARCH QUESTION 5:** What other processes or structures should be considered to evoke consistent, positive child outcomes on the indicators early education traditionally values?

**RESEARCH QUESTION 5A:** Will there ever be a time or a set of conditions when collaboration will be less necessary?
COLLABORATION 2010 AND BEYOND

• Not simple, my questions are:
  – What is the collaboration that we are investigating?
  – Is it worth knowing?
  – Is it technically knowable?
  – What do we honestly expect from it?
  – Is it still the right construct in 2010?