The Ethics of Collaboration

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In the 1990s, collaboration has become the professional equivalent of Mom and apple pie: Whether in the site-based management language of school reform efforts or in the service delivery options for students with disabilities, collaboration is typically viewed as laudable and desirable, while other approaches for carrying out the business of schools are deemed somewhat less worthy of attention. After all, the notion of professionals engaged in goal-driven activities based on voluntary relationships that stress parity, shared responsibility for decisions, and shared accountability for outcomes seems to raise standards for professional practice in schools to a new height.

At the risk of being heretical, we propose that the current popularity of collaborative efforts is masking a number of sobering ethical issues that must become part of both conceptual and applied discussions of this topic. Our intention in raising several of these issues is not to suggest that collaboration has inherent flaws, but rather to identify the risk of naive and sometimes overenthusiastic implementation.

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For example, consider this common dilemma: A classroom teacher with 15 years of experience has asked a school psychologist for problemsolving assistance regarding a student with significant learning and behavior problems. The psychologist approaches the teacher using a collaborative style, asking for active teacher involvement, minimizing advice giving, and so on. Finally, in exasperation, the teacher exclaims, "I asked you for help because I didn't know what to do. Just tell me how to handle this!" In this and other similar scenarios a well-intentioned effort at collaborative problem solving became a frustrating exercise, perhaps because the psychologist incorrectly assumed that the teacher would understand and prefer collaboration. And so a first ethical consideration for professionals inviting others to engage in collaborative interactions is whether all understand the premises on which collaboration is based and agree on the use of this approach. Because most teachers are accustomed to working in isolation and have had little opportunity for collegial interactions, it is risky to assume that all teachers welcome collaboration.

Extending the example slightly raises an additional concern. Perhaps after some agreement on the collaborative intent of the interaction, the two professionals identified a specific problem and began to generate alternatives for addressing it. However, the teacher criticized each idea as it was proposed, despite the psychologist's suggestion that evaluation occur later. The teacher may simply not have known the skills—like suspended judgment during brainstorming—that contribute to effective collaboration. Even when collaboration is preferred, some professionals have not had appropriate opportunities to acquire the interaction skills for collaboration, and expecting skillful participation without preparation may be tantamount to creating conditions for failure.

Ethical considerations in the use of collaborative approaches, however, are not restricted to a discussion of professionals' relevant knowledge and skills. Another concern is the purpose for which collaboration is undertaken. For example, it is not uncommon for special services professionals—special education administrators and teachers, speech/language specialists, school psychologists, social workers, and others—to heartily recommend to classroom teachers that collaborative programs be developed in order to more effectively meet the needs of all students in school and to reduce teacher burdens. Too often, they have a much more specific underlying agenda which is to integrate students with disabilities into the mainstream, and the resources allocated for the collaborative effort are used primarily for that purpose with very little real effort or resources directed to the other students they say will benefit. This is dishonest.
We hasten to clarify that we support efforts to appropriately integrate students with disabilities into classroom settings, and we believe that effective collaboration among professionals can greatly facilitate these efforts. What we find indefensible is the message that the goal of the program stressing collaboration is to meet all students' needs when those needs may be met only incidentally when a special services provider visits a classroom to support a student with a disability. The legal and ethical obligation to appropriately educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment cannot be allowed to sabotage the ethical need for professional integrity. If collaboration is used as a vehicle to manipulate others to agree to an agenda promoted by only one party—in this example, to mainstream students—it should not be tolerated because this process undermines the critical notion of shared specific goals and it erodes trust.

Suppose, though, that a different type of situation exists. In a school in which collaboration is known, valued, and practiced, professionals find that they must meet several times each week to update each other on ongoing shared activities. Gradually, the number of meetings grows: There are building administrative councils; grade level, middle school team, or department meetings; intervention assistance team meetings; curriculum integration meetings; and multidisciplinary team meetings. Some teachers are absent from their classrooms at least once each week, and special services professionals spend nearly half their time in meetings or traveling to them. Although collaboration often requires such ongoing interactions, at some point the issue of diminishing returns is paramount. Is the time spent in collaborative efforts worth the time taken away from direct child service delivery? In the meetings in which individual students are the focus of the interaction, is the amount of time spent discussing one student diluting the overall impact of such services by limiting the number of students who can access them?

Some might argue that the examples in this essay are misapplications of collaboration. We agree. But in current practice, these types of situations are all too frequently occurring under the rubric of collaboration and that creates an obligation for professionals to reflect on ethical responses to them.

We propose that we cannot wait for data on the efficacy of specific types of collaborative efforts to formulate guidelines for practice. Instead, we encourage professionals to act in accordance with their ethics: For those who explore the topic of collaboration through contributions to the literature, this might include acknowledging that collaboration might sometimes not be the right answer and conveying respect for others' choices of whether or not to participate in any specific collabo-
rative effort. For those in school settings, this might imply influencing others to learn about collaboration before widespread implementation of programs that rely on it and pointing out misapplications of the concept.

As the knowledge base about collaboration grows, what seems most evident is that its strength lies in its subtlety and complexity and in the numerous applications it may find in schools. But its weakness lies there, too: For collaboration to be effective, participants must have the opportunity to adequately understand it, to gradually determine its value for adults and children in schools, and to knowledgeably use it. By adhering to ethical principles in our own actions, we can help ensure that this occurs.

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