

COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH IN A POST-KATRINA ENVIRONMENT: THE FACILITATION, COMMUNICATION, AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS OF UNIVERSITY RESEARCHERS*

Gary Peters
Rose M. McNeese

This work is produced by OpenStax-CNX and licensed under the
Creative Commons Attribution License 2.0[†]

Abstract

The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina brought devastation and confusion to the Mississippi Gulf Coast region on August 29, 2005. A desperate need for leadership, collaboration, and coordination of relief and recovery efforts was revealed during a March 2007 strategic planning session involving 96 organizations, groups, agencies, and researchers working in the area. As an outgrowth of the planning session, the Inter-University Collaborative Research, Relief, and Recovery Initiative was formed March 14, 2008, with the purpose of developing a better understanding of the research process after a natural disaster and the roles of university researchers and social service providers in conducting the research. A qualitative study of the group's initial collaborative discussions was conducted implementing focus group methodology. Participants of the study included nine researchers and six social service providers working in the post-Katrina environment. Results showed needs for collaboration among researchers and social workers and the establishment of research parameters sensitive to the cultural context of this post-disaster region.



NOTE: This module has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and sanctioned by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a scholarly contribution to the knowledge base in educational administration.

*Version 1.1: Sep 29, 2008 2:38 pm -0500

[†]<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>

Described as the worst natural disaster in American history, the unprecedented magnitude of devastation left by Hurricane Katrina significantly impacted the lives of more than 1.5 million people as it made land-fall along the Mississippi Gulf Coast on August 29, 2005. According to the Department of Homeland Security (2005), the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina revealed a trail of death and destruction throughout the Gulf Coast states of Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi resulting in approximately 90,000 square miles, about the size of Great Britain, designated as national disaster areas. Goodnough (2005) noted that Hurricane Katrina was responsible for the deaths of at least 1,200 people and the destruction of property valued in billions of dollars.

In the immediate aftermath of disasters, responders often feel compelled to help in any way they can (Madrid & Grant, 2008). This was also the case for the Katrina-impacted regions as public and private organizations, social service agencies, religious groups, and individuals across the nation responded to help provide relief and recovery assistance. Unfortunately, there was little or no direction for these groups or coordination of their efforts. Without the benefit of communication or collaboration among these groups, often there was duplication of some critical services while many needs were not addressed. In the absence of effective local, state, or federal crisis plans to deal with a disaster of this magnitude, the impact of Katrina on the physical and social needs of victims continued to escalate beyond the human loss and the physical destruction directly attributed to the storm (Seidenberg, 2006).

In an effort to help facilitate communication among those providing assistance in the post-Katrina environment, two researchers from a university in southern Mississippi were asked by the Hancock Katrina Relief Initiative group to plan and facilitate a strategic planning session for Hancock County, Mississippi, assistance workers. Attending this collaborative meeting on March 12, 2007, were 96 participants including representatives from local, state, and national government offices and departments; social service agencies; educational institutions; medical providers; community service organizations; faith-based groups; and volunteers providing relief and recovery efforts immediately after the storm. Discussions among this group revealed an urgent need for essential organization, communication, and coordination of relief and recovery efforts.

From this initial planning session, including university researchers desirous of conducting research among the victims of Hurricane Katrina and several social service providers working in the Katrina impacted regions of Mississippi, a new initiative involving academia began to take root and develop. The Inter-University Collaborative Research, Relief, and Recovery Initiative was formed on March 14, 2008, as a purposeful community of learners (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005) focused on developing a better understanding of the research process after a natural disaster.

Based on a foundation of theoretical research regarding collaborative leadership, the following qualitative study was conducted during the initial collaborative meeting of the Inter-University Collaborative Research, Relief, and Recovery Initiative. The purpose of the study was to develop a better understanding and add to the body of knowledge regarding the research process after a natural disaster and the roles of university researchers and social service providers in conducting the research. Specifically, the researchers identified the needs and perceptions of university researchers and social service providers working in the post-Katrina environment of the Mississippi Gulf Coast and suggested approaches for conducting research in this region.

1 Review of the Literature

Within education, the term collaboration is continually re-inventing itself as emerging technology developments, globalization, innovative pedagogies, and a plethora of issues dictate change. Collaborative efforts in leadership, teaching, and research are considered exemplary practices (Marzano, Waters, McNulty, 2005). Collaboration is a unique phenomenon, unique in the sense that it blends the contributions of individuals within a group dynamic. It is a meshing of intellectual and social processes that creates a synthesis of shared thoughts and ideas.

Rooted in leadership theory, individuals build a community of learners as they work interdependently within a group engaged in collective inquiry about a given problem the group faces (DeFour & Eaker, 1998). Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) referred to a community of learners as a purposeful community

utilizing distributive leadership, implying shared responsibility and mutual accountability when working toward a common goal. Distributed leadership creates conditions for maximizing the collective strengths of all individuals within an organization as they strive to adapt, learn, and grow. The components of the purposeful community include collective efficacy, the capability to develop and use assets to accomplish purposes, and outcomes that matter to all community members through agreed upon processes. Collective efficacy is defined as “the shared perception or belief held by a group that the group can organize and execute a course of action that makes a difference” (Goddard, 2001, p. 469).

DeFour and Eaker (1998) contended that collaborative teams form a solid foundation as they engage in collective inquiry and focus on improvement. He refers to the collaborative team as a “professional learning community” (PLC) with the goal of “finding common ground” as the team solves problems together. The PLC shares a common vision and mission structured around shared values and goals, collective inquiry, and continuous improvement. What distinguishes a learning community from other groups is its collective commitment to guiding principles that articulate the beliefs and govern the actions and behaviors of the group. Collective inquiry results in the group challenging the status quo, seeking new and improved methods of achieving goals, and reflecting on the results. Through the collective inquiry process, the group reflects publicly on their beliefs and challenges the beliefs of others as they hammer out common meanings, plan and test actions, and coordinate the actions of the group.

The group practices that underlie learning organizations are seen as a means of producing more effective organizations. Deming (1986) argued in his work on total quality management that quality is achieved through constant incremental improvement and that teams facilitate the necessary communication and feedback for ongoing organizational improvement. Senge (1990) focused on five disciplines that are characteristic of highly effective businesses: team learning, shared organizational vision, systems thinking, individual mastery, and mental modeling. Both theorists contend that working in focused collaborative teams contributes to productive learning organizations.

To develop effective group practices, individuals must interact or form relationships in productive and unique ways. Wenger (1998) developed a social theory of learning labeled “communities of practice.” He identified three key components of the theory relative to individual group members: (a) participate in communities of practice and engage mutually in the task at hand; (b) collaboratively negotiate the focus of the group; and (c) develop a set of common practices to share their work. Wenger explained a “community of practice” as a matter of sustaining enough mutual engagement in an effort to share significant learning experiences.

Fullan (1994) shared that a system of accountability grows out of relationships between local autonomy and the creation of professional communities with shared purpose and high levels of collaboration. Mattesich and Monsey (1992) defined collaboration as a commitment to mutual relationships, jointly developed structures, shared responsibility, mutual authority and accountability, and sharing of resources and rewards. This theory reveals that a layer of individual accountability and motivation for achievement of the goals of the group will grow as relationships are formed through collaborative learning communities.

Using data can be a powerful mechanism for bringing members of a group together around the issues of the group (Waters, et al., 2003). The key to using data for group motivation to change is to focus on the questions, concerns, and/or issues that are important to the group; identify those factors over which the members of the group have no direct control (i.e., demographic data); and shift the focus to the factors over which the group may have some direct control or influence (i.e., programs and practices of the group). When data are used as a tool for positively impacting the group needs, individuals will engage in the process. Once a problem/question is identified, teams then work together through the steps of the process to address the identified needs of the group or the organization. Collaboration, reflection, dialogue, and planning with accurate meaningful data provide powerful learning communities that focus on attaining the goals of the organization. Peters (2007) added, “Through collaboration common understanding can be built which will empower groups to be more conciliatory and facilitative in their actions. The development of common understandings allows change to occur” (p. 367).

2 Significance of the Study

As researchers converged on the Mississippi Gulf Coast to conduct inquiry, there were no structures in place to protect the vulnerability of those recovering from this massive storm or to prevent the duplication of recovery or research efforts conducted in this post-Katrina environment. Input during a collaborative meeting of Katrina recovery providers in March 2007 revealed a desperate need for communication, collaboration, and coordination among relief organizations and groups to more efficiently and effectively address the many needs of this community. Researchers and social service workers attending the collaborative meeting indicated a need for developing new approaches for conducting research in this and other communities impacted by a disaster of this magnitude.

From the literature review on collaboration and the information reported during the March 2007 Hancock Katrina Relief Initiative meeting, it was evident to the researchers that further collaboration among university researchers and social service workers in the post-Katrina environment was needed to create a collaborative and purposeful community of learners (DeFour & Eaker, 1998; Deming, 1986; Fullan, 1994; Leithwood, Jantizi, & Steinbach, 1990; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Mattesshich & Monsey, 1992; Peters, 2008; Senge, 1990; Wenger, 1998), engage in dialogue, build mutual relationships and collective efficacy, identify needs and find common ground, establish a common focus and outcomes that matter, develop a set of agreed upon processes, identify available resources, and engage in collective inquiry and research.

The Study

Rational for the Study

Problem

During the collaborative strategic planning session of the Hancock Katrina Relief Initiative in 2007, various social service agency workers shared concern for dealing with increasing numbers of inquiries from university researchers. The lines between recovery and research had become blurred as residents began questioning certain research activities. The perception that some researchers were perhaps overly opportunistic when the community-at-large was steeped in a recovery process was evident. The range of experiences shared by social service workers suggested everything from quid-pro-quo arrangements with hurricane victims to improperly crediting research provided by first-responders. This discussion was a cause of great concern to university researchers conducting research in the post-Katrina environment.

As a result of these discussions, a new group involving university professors and social service providers emerged to address research efforts being conducted in the post-Katrina environment in the Mississippi Gulf Coast region. The group formed a new organization, the Inter-University Collaborative Research, Relief, and Recovery Initiative, and conducted their initial meeting on March 14, 2008, at the Katrina Research Center housed on the campus of The University of Southern Mississippi in Long Beach, Mississippi. The purpose of this initiative was to develop a better understanding of the research process after a natural disaster and the roles of university researchers and social service providers in conducting the research. Control or oversight of the entire region devastated by Hurricane Katrina was not the goal of the group, but rather conducting healthy collaborative discussions of protocols by which interested university researchers could agree in principle.

Purpose

The purpose of this research study was to develop a better understanding and add to the body of knowledge regarding the research process after a natural disaster and the roles of university researchers and social service providers in conducting the research in a post-Katrina environment. Furthermore, the research was founded upon three underlying principles:

1. The study sought to give voice to social service providers and university researchers regarding their needs, perceptions, and suggestions for research in the post-Katrina environment.
2. Any initiative to conduct research in a disaster-ravaged community should be done in partnership with, and with great sensitivity to, the post-Katrina culture and people of that community.
3. Researchers need to develop models of inquiry that provide new and innovative collaborations.

3 Method

The study conducted by the researchers used focus groups as its method of data collection for measuring the participants' opinions on post-Katrina research initiatives. Focus groups traditionally provide a rich form of data. This research effort explored opinions given by the participants in order to better understand their dispositions. Participants were asked a series of questions and then provided an opportunity to respond orally. Participants were also provided information about Hurricane Katrina from a curator and then they discussed their own experiences. Results from the focus group were used to develop a better understanding and add to the body of knowledge regarding the research process after a natural disaster and the roles of university researchers and social service providers in conducting the research in a post-Katrina environment. Kitzinger (1995) noted:

The idea behind the focus group method is that group processes can help people to explore and clarify their views in ways that would be less easily accessible in a one to one interview. Group discussion is particularly appropriate when the interviewer has a series of open ended questions and wishes to encourage research participants to explore the issues of importance to them, in their own vocabulary, generating their own questions and pursuing their own priorities. When group dynamics work well the participants work alongside the researcher, taking the research in new and often unexpected directions. (p. 5)

Access to participants of this study was through a previous strategic planning session of the Hancock Katrina Relief Initiative which involved social service agencies and the pursuant research initiatives that had either taken place or were being planned. The sampling technique used was purposive sampling (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). In using purposive sampling, the researchers sought samples with a purpose in mind. The initial research was conducted in a focus group setting in which participants responded to questions and proposals prepared by researchers of the host university. Focus groups are a useful qualitative research technique to obtain data from small groups about their opinions, attitudes, and feelings on a given subject. Krueger (1994) noted that a unique aspect of focus group research is the absence of definitive guidelines. This particular technique was used in order to reveal the needs, opinions, and suggestions of research professionals and social service providers who may form a learning community to conduct research on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Peek and Fothergill (2007) used focus groups in a Katrina-related research project to "illustrate some of the strengths and challenges of the focus group as a sociological research method" (p.1). Eisner (1991) stated, "Researchers must see what is to be seen, given some frame of reference and some set of intentions...the self is the instrument that engages the situation and makes sense of it" (pp. 33-34).

4 Research Questions

1. What are the needs, perceptions, and suggestions of university researchers and social service providers with regard to post-Katrina research conducted in the Mississippi Gulf Coast regions?
2. What are the needs, perceptions, and suggestions for collaboration among university researchers and social service providers with regard to their respective research and recovery roles in the post-Katrina environment of the Mississippi Gulf Coast region?
3. What are the perceptions of university researchers and social service providers with regard to the cultural context of the post-Katrina environment of the Mississippi Gulf Coast region?

Individuals were invited to participate in the study because of their active involvement with social service agencies or a university assisting with recovery or conducting research in the post-Katrina environment of the Mississippi Gulf Coast region impacted by Hurricane Katrina during the period of time immediately after the storm, August 29, 2005, through the initiation of the study on March 18, 2008. Thirty university researchers and social service providers were invited to participate in focus group discussions at the initial meeting of the Inter-University Collaborative Research, Relief, and Recovery Initiative on March 18, 2008. A purposive sample of nine university researchers and six social service providers actually attended the meeting and all of the attendees (15) participated in the collaborative leadership focus groups, representing 50 percent of those invited to participate in the study. The university researchers represented four different

universities. The social service providers represented four different social service agencies, one hospital, and one faith-based organization.

5 Data Collection and Analysis

Focus groups were facilitated by senior researchers from the host university, with research team observers present to take notes and record the specific statements of participants during the discussions. Kaplan and Maxwell (1994) contend that researchers' attempt to understand a phenomenon from the unique perspective of its participants is minimized when quantifiable methods are employed. Consequently, qualitative focus group methodology was employed in the collection of data and its analysis for this study.

According to Senge (1990), the discipline of team learning, or focus groups, starts with 'dialogue', the capacity of members of a team to suspend assumptions and enter into a genuine 'thinking together'. To the Greeks *dia-logos* meant a free-flowing of meaning through a group, allowing the group to discover insights not attainable individually. As a researcher, focus group methodology involves scripting the dialogue of participants, observing and recording the patterns of interaction within the group, and identifying the emerging themes of the discussions.

Topics of discussion for the focus group were developed from the Katrina Research Center curator, the literature about Hurricane Katrina research efforts to date, and the experiences of researchers themselves. Because participant numbers were

small, researchers undertook efforts to ensure that the participants could not be identified from the quotations recorded. The speakers were coded, but the researchers purposely selected quotations from a broad spectrum of participants, highlighting areas of consensus and disagreement. Following the analysis of the data and comparisons with existing resources, the researchers of this study identified critical themes which serve as a collaborative framework for future research efforts.

Results from the Focus Group Discussions

In addressing the study aim, discussions fell into two broad areas: first, the sharing of ideas/approaches, and secondly, providing an understanding of the cultural context in which research is being conducted. The findings were then presented as themes within each of these areas.

Sharing Ideas and Approaches

Theme 1: Funding Research and Recovery Efforts

After an informational session in which the curator presented an overview of recovery and research efforts to date, the group responded to a series of questions. Participants initially responded by reporting the critical needs of their specific agency, occasionally adding political commentary. The discussion at this point focused on tangible supplies and resources. "If you agree on the needs, you can get funding for research and recovery," declared one participant. However, a university researcher stated, "Funding will not come to a place void of leadership and coordination." Emphasizing this perspective, another researcher commented: "If you need 150 toilets – we can't do that – ask Lowe's to help...but tell me what you want from a major foundation." The implication from this participant's perspective was that lamenting over the needs of each social service agency merely provided a micro perspective of the real problem. There was greater monetary opportunity available through grants from major foundations willing to help with recovery efforts.

Research could be a by-product to the greater good accomplished through a coordinated effort to work with major research universities seeking to provide genuine assistance. The question now became whether the group's perspective was too miniscule, whether the vision was too small and in need of refocusing to what one participant described as "seeing the big picture." Discussions pertaining to university researchers helping social service providers secure much needed grants were appealing to most participants. This united approach quickly gained acceptance from both researchers and service providers. Participants from the faith-based organizations noted the benefits of being free of "governmental red tape and bureaucracy which too often hinders rather than help the recovery process," noted a service provider. However, other faith-based initiatives were at the forefront of new grant proposals. "Even churches are hiring grant writers to help with the recovery effort," noted another participant, who added that "my home church is trying to meet specific needs in the community that are not being addressed."

Several participants addressed the matter of fatigue among social service providers and the Mississippi Gulf Coast residents themselves as post-Katrina recovery efforts continue. Words such as depleted, exhausted, overcome, and overwhelmed were freely expressed. The tireless efforts of social service providers who were often understaffed and who lacked adequate resources resulted in a recognized mental fatigue and perspective. Many participants had suffered the personal loss of home, possessions, and even family. They noted that many times it was a conscious decision to delay their personal recovery in order to put others first. Expressions from the focus group indicated that participants really didn't feel that others knew the full extent of their own sacrifice in order to provide community services.

An inter-faith service provider commented: "Interfaith ps." The participant spoke of the successes enjoyed by his faith-based initiative, citing their rap agencies are getting the job done. . .we really want to know how we can partner with new groups with established reputation in the community. Continuing his response before the group, he added, "Faith-based programs are far superior to government programs. . .they are able to do more with a dollar. . .they are not encumbered with red tape or bureaucracy." There was a challenge issued to better coordinate recovery efforts and to partner with inter-faith agencies. A university researcher then commented, "I'd summarize by saying we need more grants written, more human service initiatives, and for all to know that the social service providers of south Mississippi are exhausted."

Theme 2: The Need for Collaboration

The second theme to emerge was a call for greater collaboration. The social service providers continue to address issues related to records, information, and services. "Bay St. Louis officials still have no idea how many people are living in their city," stated one participant. The fact that municipalities have this difficulty is testimony to the fact that accurate information and its proper assimilation to the community remains a challenge. Another service provider offered a different perspective as she emphatically noted "We build it while we fly it. . .that is our strategic plan." Social service agencies use the information they have and in a sense it is truly "building as they fly" with the understanding that programs and services must be highly adaptable in such an environment. The desire to share information and work in unison was not only evident among social service agencies but also the university researchers in attendance. "We got involved a year ago. . .we have many schools within our university. . .we don't live down here. . .we don't want to waste our time and efforts," warned one researcher. Another commented, "Colleges and universities have been sending [student] work groups to south Mississippi during spring break but there is very little collaboration between groups. . .my university wants to collaborate with other universities." Some responses were conditional as a researcher stated, "The Gulf Coast must show sustainability." Another participant emphasized the importance of process when he stated, "We must know how to link to databases and information sources." The participants spoke of collaboration in regard to information, services, and research. "Collaboration is needed in research so that people respect the researcher and research process," concluded a university researcher.

Providing an Understanding of the Cultural Context

Theme 1: People First, Research Second

A university researcher noted, "We must continually refocus our purpose to the people of this region." The theme "people first, research second" resonated with participants. Understanding both the benefits and risks of conducting research in the post-Katrina stressful environment required a proactive stance on the part of prospective researchers. Participants expressed an admiration for colleagues who painstakingly established research practices that respected the existing culture. However, social service providers and researchers alike shared less-than-desirable practices on the part of researchers who seemingly placed research ahead of people. "I had one university that offered us [social service agency] assistance if it [research group] could conduct research as part of a binding agreement. . .I said no thanks." This type of quid pro quo arrangement for research was unacceptable to participants who cited serious ethical concerns. The first step to establishing a strong ethical and integrity-laden bond between all researchers seeking to conduct research on the Mississippi Gulf Coast would be a clearinghouse. Having a place to house artifacts, research papers, and media-related items pertaining to Hurricane Katrina would be significant. "The Katrina Research Center could become a clearinghouse of sorts for researchers, residents of the community, and student workers," stated one researcher. Sensitivity to the plight of those affected by Hurricane Katrina was foundational to research proposals. The fact that this culture remains engaged in a recovery process cannot be minimized. "Post-Katrina storm

disorder [PKSD], a stress-related condition, is rampant in the culture,” shared one university researcher. As the participants’ discussion came to a close, a service provider offered this concluding thought, “I fear the long-term effects of our recovery.” The disaster and its aftermath have exacted a heavy toll on the citizenry, relief workers, and municipalities. Fatigue has given way to a skepticism that questions motives. “If you want to conduct research in our back yard then make it a respectful process...always people first,” stated a social service provider and resident.

Theme 2: Understanding the Sense of Loss

“I do community advocacy and believe me affordable housing projects are desperately needed...recovery starts with a place to live,” observed a service provider. An understanding of the loss suffered by Hurricane Katrina victims begins with a “sense of home... a place of belonging.” A sharing of personal experiences by participants gave a new perspective to the identity and individuality associated with individuals’ homes. Reflecting on this tremendous sense of loss, a researcher noted, “The Gulf Coast will never be what it was...there is a great sense of loss here...not only homes but virtually all of the records and archival data from Hurricane Camille were lost in Katrina...we must secure the research and data from Hurricane Katrina so that the same thing doesn’t happen again...there were 350 buildings on the National Historic Preservation lost.” Concluding, he stated, “We cannot lose our history...there has been no price tag attached to that great loss.” The sense of loss as discussed by participants of the focus group was not merely the loss of material possessions but the dearth of resources and support essential for sustaining the human spirit. There were two categories of people: those who experienced the disaster first-hand and those who came afterward. An undeniable bond existed between survivors which provided them a respected right of passage to share their experiences.

Participants agreed that an “empathetic understanding of what really happened to the people” was primary to framing the questions researchers would eventually ask.

A researcher impacted by Hurricane Katrina confided, “We [university professors] gave ourselves to the students and that has been our priority, even when we didn’t have resources ourselves... our faculty is exhausted.” Discussions centered on the loss of homes, livelihoods, community history. For many in the focus group, their losses were both personal and professional. All participants were empathetically listening to their colleagues. It is only when researchers begin to comprehend the totality of this nation’s worst national disaster that they will “be able to frame the appropriate research questions,” a participant stated. Adding to the previous researcher’s comment another participant concluded, “If we truly understand the sense of loss, we will put people first and research second.”

Theme 3: The Role of Research in a Post-Katrina Environment

A university researcher boldly stated, “Some faculty members feel that they have been taken advantage of by outside researchers who failed to adequately source their research.” Another quickly added, “The ripping off of faculty on research endeavors needs to be addressed.” Speaking to the individualistic and disturbing nature of some researchers, a social service provider noted, “Self-serving researchers will have few second opportunities to right the wrongs they have done.” In response to this line of discussion, a university researcher offered this solution, “If the universities directly affected by Hurricane Katrina will take the lead in developing a collaborative research community it will benefit all universities interested in conducting research.” Another participant shared his decision, “I have declared the Mississippi Gulf Coast to be a research-free zone for the time being.” This action was taken to protect this particular university from the allegedly unscrupulous practice of other researchers who descended upon the region. In deference to the community, another researcher chose a course of action he felt was consistent with the culturally sensitive post-Katrina environment. This researcher felt that research efforts should go forward because “we must capture the voice of the people...we must document what has happened here.” Further elaborating on this subject a researcher added, “we have seen people at their best and worst...we need our university students to see what has happened here...but never to overstep the boundaries this local community has established...our role as researchers must be sensitive to the cultural context.” Summarizing, a participant stated, “I know of other universities that are not able to be here today but have a deep interest in being a part of what we are doing today.” The appropriateness of conducting research in the Mississippi Gulf Coast was conditional: researchers were indeed needed but all research efforts should respect the work and plight

of others.

6 Discussion

Response to Research Questions

Question One: What are the needs, perceptions, and suggestions of university researchers and social service providers with regard to post-Katrina research conducted in the Mississippi Gulf Coast regions?

Collaborative research efforts are possible. Social service providers can effectively pursue timely and coordinated responses in a post-Katrina environment, and also be more successful in securing grants if they collaborate with university researchers. Partnering with universities provides social service agencies with a strengthened position in which academia utilize their considerable grant-writing capacity while agencies identify needs in the community. Early intervention efforts could be better directed and more culturally sensitive as researchers work within a collaborative framework. Confidence in the researchers' ability to treat all participants equitably, incisively, and with due diligence to ongoing ethical considerations is critical to the university's reputation and future opportunities. Furthermore, university researchers, both faculty and students, have ample opportunities to partner with other universities as demonstrated by participants of the focus group. Identifying the problems, understanding them fully, and lastly, proposing specific actions was part of the process on this day.

When universities sent their students to the Mississippi Gulf Coast they were duplicating each others efforts with respect to securing housing, transportation, food, and general acclamation to the region. The derived benefit of these collaborations would be the development of protocols for conducting research in disaster-ravaged communities. The establishment of a clearinghouse to dispense information about research initiatives proposed by various universities across the country would allow networking opportunities and ultimately lead to new inter-university collaborations. Beginning with the simple logistics of housing the collaboration would proceed to issues of research protocols. University researchers expressed a preference for universities in the affected region to lead in the collaborative effort as they would be culturally astute in the community. Additionally, participants felt local universities should take the lead in research/grant efforts due to their obligatory commitment to the community. Participants were eager to pursue collaborative research efforts but specific conditions prefaced involvement on the part of several universities. The following seven conditions were expressed by participants who viewed them as necessary for the success of the proposed collaboration:

1. Develop a macro perspective which sees beyond the immediate limitations.
2. Establish a clearinghouse in the region to receive inquiries.
3. Universities in the affected region to take the lead in implementing initiatives.
4. Strategic use of faith-based programs in the recovery and research effort.
5. Sharing information to facilitate processes.
6. Universities establishing an understanding and agreement upon research protocols.
7. Social services agencies communicating and collaborating with academia to pursue substantial funding through grant opportunities.

Question Two: What are the needs, perceptions, and suggestions for collaboration among university researchers and social service providers with regard to their respective research and recovery roles in the post-Katrina environment of the Mississippi Gulf Coast region?

A collaborative effort in which stakeholders work together to enhance their understanding of the affected community's needs was mentioned as a primary goal. More specifically, an in-depth understanding of the great "sense of loss" that south Mississippians experienced would hopefully temper the research process. A strong advocacy for empathetic listening skills was first mentioned by researchers who identified a cultural insensitivity within the research community that converged on south Mississippi. An immediate benefit of the focus group session was the participants' discussion on how they could complement each other and potentially advance their agendas through collaboration.

Embracing an empathetic approach to establish cultural sensitivity could provide researchers with a framework for better understanding the community's plight and lead to the eventual development of a collaborative research process. The exercise of data collection and methodology can be a collaborative effort between researchers and recovery participants. Developing a strong tradition of research collaboration with academia would also benefit university students who have sought opportunities to apply newly acquired knowledge and skills. Participants expressed a need for different approaches and practices in conducting research where natural disasters have occurred. A respectful research relationship builds trust which participants considered essential for ethical outcomes. A successful collaborative research process would provide a more in-depth cultural sensitivity, enhance funding opportunities, promote inter-university researcher initiatives, and establish partnerships between social service agencies and research universities. Having a physical facility to serve as a clearinghouse would help achieve these objectives. The focus group identified five areas that reinforce the need for collaboration between researchers and social service agencies in a disaster-ravaged community.

1. Social service providers quickly identify the needs of a community for researchers to consider grant possibilities.
2. The proposed collaboration helps protect a "people first – research second" perspective in the community.
3. Participants identified the need for a support system which could be achieved in part through a collaborative effort.
4. Recovery efforts provide an immediate assistance while research represents a more sustained understanding, appreciation, and a possible monetary distribution through grants.
5. Communication is enhanced through collaboration.

Question Three: What are the perceptions of university researchers and social services providers with regard to the cultural context of the post-Katrina environment of the Mississippi Gulf Coast region?

Not only did the participants in this focus group have to come to terms with the tragedy on a personal level, but like many others trying to function in the aftermath of this disaster, they needed to react fast and be resilient in their recovery and research efforts. The disaster undermined the physical and psychological resources of the whole community, affecting the social service agencies and researchers alike, leaving them under a greater risk for Post-Katrina storm disorder [PKSD], a stress-related condition. For many people, the residual effect of the storm was that houses and personal belongings were gone. Their way of life was disrupted, and the normal daily routine of life was now a distant memory.

The unprecedented breadth and duration of Hurricane Katrina caused extensive disorganization that exceeded the scope of even the best devised disaster plans. Participants constantly make adjustments and improvised procedures to successfully address emerging issues in the post-Katrina environment. In this context, some participants felt that researchers may have lacked a proper protocol for conducting research. In summary, the overall perception of researchers was that research efforts should go forward because "we must capture the voice of the people. . .we must document what has happened here."

7 Conclusion

Collaborations vary in meaning, quality, and purpose just as the ever-changing dynamics of a group bring newness. Dewey (1929) noted that "true education comes through the stimulation of the student's powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself" (p. 3). It was imperative that research efforts in the post-Katrina environment respect the existing paradigm while seeking to broaden the community. Gray (1989) stated that collaborative leadership provides "a process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem [or issue] can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible" (p. 5).

Collaborative research efforts benefit from a framework in which researchers understand, unite, and in action clearly demonstrate an empathetic but professional disposition for both process and person. This

cooperative stance supports researchers working together on common research problems. Facilitating collaboration among university researchers in the post-Katrina environments enables scholars to disseminate enhanced research protocols to a broader network of colleagues. The simple principle of respect has a wide variety of applications in environments where the culture is still in recovery mode. Capra (1997) noted, “A paradigm is a constellation of concepts, values, perceptions and practices shared by a community, which forms a particular vision of reality that is the basis of the way a community organizes itself (p. 6).” If a single vision for research in the post-Katrina environment could be cast, then participating university researchers could reorganize themselves into a more effective post-Katrina research initiative.

The Inter-University Collaborative Research, Relief, and Recovery Initiative orchestrated a purposeful community of learners based on a foundation of theoretical research regarding collaborative leadership with the goal of developing a better understanding of the research process after a natural disaster. Hancock county residents, university researchers, and social service providers became a collaborative community of learners focused on addressing research concerns and needs in the post-Katrina environment. As guidelines and processes for conducting research after a disaster of this magnitude are limited, further study and research in this area is recommended. Additional meetings are planned for this collaborative group to continue the process of collaborative collective inquiry.

8 REFERENCES

- Capra, T. (1997). *The web of life*. New York, NY: Anchor Books.
- Deming, W. E. (1986). *Out of a crisis*. Cambridge, MA: Center for Advanced Engineering Study.
- Eisner, E. W. (1991). *The enlightened eye: Qualitative inquiry and the enhancement of educational practice*. New York: Macmillan.
- DuFour, R., & Eaker, R. (1998). *Professional learning communities at work: Best practices for enhancing student achievement*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Department of Homeland Security (2005). *The first year after Hurricane Katrina: What the federal government did*. Retrieved from: http://www.dhs.gov/xprepresp/programs/gc_1157649340100.shtm.
- Fullan, M. (2001). *Leading in a culture of change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Gray, B. (1989). *Collaborating: Finding common ground for multiparty problems*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Goddard, R.D. (2001). Collective efficacy: A neglected construct in the study of schools and student achievement. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 93(3), 467-476.
- Goodnough, A. (2005). Intense storms of '05 may become the norm. Retrieved March 2, 2008, from: <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/30/national/nationalspecial/30hurricane.html>¹.
- Gray, B. (1989). *Collaborating: Finding common ground for multiparty problems*. San Francisco: Josey-Bass.
- Kaplan, B. and Maxwell, J.A. (1994). *Qualitative research methods for evaluating computer information systems*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Kitzinger, J. (1995) *Qualitative research: Introducing focus groups*. Retrieved August 1, 2008 from <http://www.bmj.com/cgi/content/full/311/7000/299>².
- Krueger, R. A. (1994). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Leithwood, K., Jantzi, D., & Steinbach, R. (1999). *Changing leadership for changing times* Buckingham, MK: Open University Press.
- Madrid, P.A. & Grant, R. (2008). Meeting mental health needs following a natural disaster: Lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 39, 1, 86-92.
- Marshall C. and Rossman G. B. (1999). *Designing qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Marzano, R.J., Waters, T., & McNulty, B.A. (2005). *School Leadership That Works: From Research to Results*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

¹ <http://SanDiego.revised8.08.pub.doc/>

² <http://www.bmj.com/cgi/content/full/311/7000/299>

Mattessich, P. & Monsey, B. (1992). *Collaboration: what makes it work*. Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, St. Paul, MN.

Peek, L. & Fothergill, A. (2007) Using focus groups for qualitative research. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, TBA, New York, New York City Online. Retrieved April 6, 2008 from http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p183125_index.html³

Peters, G. (2008) Group collaboration in education. In *Encyclopedia of Information Technology Curriculum Integration* (Vol. 1, pp. 93-98). Hershey, Pennsylvania: IBI Global Publications

Senge, P., (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. New York: NY: Doubleday.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

³http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p183125_index.html