

Strategic Dynamics:

**A Collaborative Route to Program
Development**

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STRATEGIC DYNAMICS: A COLLABORATIVE ROUTE TO PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

Practitioners and funders working in a range of institutional arenas frequently look to collaboration as a strategy for achieving effective service delivery, or creating systemic reform, or both.¹ But the actual practice of collaboration is often more difficult and demanding than expected – and sometimes more rewarding. The paper presents a case study of the Altman Early Literacy Collaborative (AELC) as a window into the development of the collaborative, the capacity of members to employ collaborative methods to negotiate tensions and meet internal challenges, and the success of the collaborative in creating and implementing a new program in early childhood centers and head start programs. The paper, which is organized thematically into periods of collaborative development, follows the growth of the collaborative, from its first year as the “Altman Early Literacy Collaborative” into its transformation, in the second year of program implementation, into the “Art in Reading” (AIR).²

More generally, the paper explores the dynamic of developing, practicing, and refining a collaborative effort to create and implement a new program that builds on but differs from other programs of each of the collaborating organizational members. Collaboration made the group’s joint program possible, sparking new conceptual frameworks and new strategies, as well as the more customary joining of partners’ skills, resources, and approaches. Over time, the partnering organizations integrated their efforts to create a program that melded and then moved beyond each of their individual approaches and expertise. In addition, members’ attempts to translate the program concept into practice made demands on partners to push their own organizational boundaries and break new programmatic ground.

The paper ends with lessons about collaboration as a means of generating new programs and strategies while deepening partners’ own organizational perspectives and capacities.

¹ Examples of initiatives that utilize collaborative strategies include the Donors’ Education Collaborative, which funds collaborative projects using policy formation, advocacy, and constituency building to create systemic change in the New York City school system; The Bridge Builders: To Preserve the Families of Highbridge, which brings together a range of agencies offering family supports, legal assistance, and other services to work within a collaborative framework to reduce child abuse in the Highbridge section of the Bronx; and the New Century High Schools Initiative, managed by New Visions for Public Schools, in which school and organizational partners work collaboratively to plan, implement, and lead new small high schools in New York City.

² The paper uses the group’s formal title Altman Early Literacy Collaborative to refer to the group during the planning phase and first year of program implementation. In the second year of implementation, the group formally adopted a new title, Art in Reading, which the paper uses to refer to the second year of implementation. The paper uses both titles in the lessons section because lessons rely on the entire history of the collaborative.

BACKGROUND

In fall 1999, the Altman Foundation invited several grantees – each with an interest in early childhood education – to meet and share information about their work. Among the participating organizations were four that decided to meet again and perhaps develop a longer-term relationship.

From this modest start, and despite challenges and bumps along the way, the organizations came together as a collaborative with program aims. Two years later, in fall 2001, the partners, as the Altman Early Literacy Collaborative (AELC), implemented a “package of services” that aimed to foster a creative approach to books and art among early childhood teachers and to support the teachers as they employed the approach in parent workshops as well as in their classrooms. Eventually, the collaborative members built on their initial effort to craft a distinctive, integrated program that engages teachers, builds capacity in the participating child care centers and head start programs, and fosters parent engagement with their children’s learning experiences and their schools. Moreover, the new program simultaneously weaves together and expands the expertise of the partnering organizations.

During the process, the collaborative has weathered membership changes, intensive work to clarify and implement its theory of change, and efforts to expand beyond a “boutique” program by increasing the number of target classrooms and by developing strategies to promote program sustainability. In the summer and fall 2003, as the collaborative planned its third year of implementation, the joint work continued to stretch partners in unexpected ways, just as their program offers new perspectives to the early childhood teachers with whom they work. In their third program year in 2003-04, the collaborative is working in a total of 27 classrooms across seven early childhood centers in the Bronx, Bedford-Stuyvesant and Williamsburg in Brooklyn, and Harlem, the upper Westside, and the Bloomingdale section of Manhattan.

The Role of Chapin Hall

In early 2001, about a year into the founding of the collaborative, the Altman Foundation hosted a meeting of the AELC and invited a documenter from the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago. The foundation was interested in exploring – through documentation – the strategy of collaboration. Several months later, in August, the documenter began exploring the work and operational methods of the collaborative with the following goals: to stimulate reflection on the collaborative process among partners and the funder; foster intentional development of collaborative practices; and cull lessons about the conception and practice of collaboration as a strategy for furthering program creation. The study, which continued from August 2001 through July 2003, included interviews with collaborative participants, review of project materials, attendance at AELC meetings, and, once the program began in September 2001, observation of program events as a way of understanding partners’ joint work.

In spring 2002, the documenter's role slowly began to expand. While continuing to write "working memos" for the foundation and partners on the collaborative process and implementation of the program, the documenter also undertook a series of facilitation tasks. This occurred at the request first of the funder and later of the collaborative partners themselves. These tasks included raising probing questions about the aims and strategies of the collaborative and the roles of members; fostering open communications among partners; chairing strategy sessions regarding program development, and acting as a sounding board for individual partners and the collaborative as a whole.³

THE ART IN READING COLLABORATIVE: A CASE STUDY

The Art in Reading collaborative has a history that is somewhat out of the ordinary. The group, which began as the Altman Early Literacy Collaborative, was founded with the support and initial impetus of a funder, not an unusual start for collaborations. But in this instance, the Altman Foundation joined such support with a call for the partners themselves to define the group, its purpose, and its goals as they saw fit.⁴

³ Despite some initial concern that the roles of documenter and facilitator might conflict, in practice they complemented each other. The working memos to the partners and the foundation were always meant as internal documents to help illuminate the collaborative process and thereby help partners become more reflective and intentional in their efforts. The facilitation tasks extended the early aim to stimulate reflection. The role of documenter, an outsider with insider knowledge, strengthened the ability to facilitate, while the role of facilitator led to greater documentation insights.

⁴ Collaborations often start in one of two ways. Joint efforts may arise because organizations themselves identify reasons to work together. However, lack of support is a major drawback to such efforts, especially given the usually scarce resources, including staff time, of non-profit organizations. The other approach, which helps alleviate the press for support, occurs when organizations come together in response to a funder's Request For Proposals (RFP) that requires collaboration. This can happen for a number of reasons. For example, the RFP requires work on multiple fronts (such as policy research and community organizing) that may not be found in one organization, or the RFP requires the involvement of multiple sectors (such as the police, local schools, and non-profit service providers), or the funder believes that collaboration in itself brings some added value to the work of the project. Some of the hallmark characteristics of this second approach to collaborating include the following: organizations decide to work together because of the RFP; they must relate their strengths and interests to the project set out by the RFP; and they must figure out how to interact organizationally in the midst of substantive planning of a proposal and, if successful, implementing the proposed work. In addition, organizational efforts to collaborate, most significantly staff time for meetings, communications among partners, joint decision making, and so forth, may be viewed as a necessary component of the proposal but does not receive designated support.

FIRST MEETING: FALL 1999

The possibility of collaborating was set in motion in fall 1999 with an invitation from the Altman Foundation to several of its grantees to attend a gathering in order to meet. From all accounts, this was a low-key, "get-to-know-you meeting".⁵ From the funder's perspective, "[t]here were no expectations when I called the meeting" and "[t]here was no *quid pro quo* involved". By the end of the meeting, however, representatives from four of the participating organizations sensed a value in further meetings. These organizations were:

- **The Best Practices in Early Literacy Project at the Child and Family Policy Center at New York University (Best Practices).** Builds the capacity of early childhood program directors to assess and support the early literacy practices of their staffs. The project trains directors to use its observational assessment instrument, Supports for Early Literacy Assessment (SELA). An early childhood specialist, working one-to-one and on-site, assists each director in designing and implementing a quality improvement plan for one classroom and helps the teacher recognize and strengthen what she/he is already doing to foster literacy learning, devise new pro-literacy practices, ensure developmentally appropriate activities, and strengthen parent involvement.
- **New York City College of Technology's Center for Intergenerational Reading (CIR).** Provides professional development to prepare teachers to conduct a family literacy program for parents, introducing them to multicultural children's literature and reading and discussion strategies to use with their children. The program's primary goal is to offer parents the tools, knowledge, and motivation to read to their children at home, thereby fostering a strong reading relationship within the family.
- **Jumpstart – New York (Jumpstart).** Prepares college students to work one-to-one with preschool children from participating early childhood centers. The children, who are identified as needing additional help with early literacy, use of language, and social skills, spend time with their Jumpstart partners in the center during the school day and in a Jumpstart after-school program at the center. Jumpstart provides the college volunteers with pre- and in-service High/Scope-based early childhood training to support their work.
- **Studio in a School Association, Inc. (Studio).** Fosters children's creative and intellectual development through visual arts programs, directed by professional artists. Most relevant for the AELC, Studio artists work in early childhood centers for 32 weeks to provide, in partnership with teachers, visual art experiences for young children. The practice of creating art helps foster early literacy skills. The program includes professional development workshops in which teachers make art and explore links between the language of visual arts and other areas of the early childhood curriculum.

⁵ All quotes in the text are from two sources. In discussing the growth and workings of the collaboration, quotes are from the key groups – foundation and partner staff members – involved. These quotes are drawn from group meetings or interviews with staff members and the foundation officer. In addition, the paper draws on project-generated materials.

The four organizations agreed together to meet again and explore the feasibility of some kind of continuing group. Whether or how the group might develop was an open-ended question; a grantee says that the undertaking was seen as "an experiment". But if such a group formed, it would have foundation support, initially in the form of a facilitator. During that initial meeting, an attendee, affiliated with one of the four organizations, volunteered to facilitate the next steps – whatever they might be.

Although the initial meeting was low-key, it was neither a random nor large gathering. The funder, who knew both the invited organizations and the executive directors, had hand-selected them for specific reasons. The funder recognized the overlap of interests, strategies, and goals of the organizations and felt it could be useful for them to get to know each other; moreover, the specific individuals "seemed like the right personalities for such a meeting," that is, "smart, creative, non-hierarchical, and doing good work". The foundation's pro-active approach was grounded in a sense that programs can be more effective and sustainable if program staff members exercise ongoing self-reflection, an openness to new ideas and organizational cross-fertilization, and a willingness to contemplate and undertake change. Perceptions of the funder's general expectations of constructive interchange and organizational development were important in helping to create the conversational atmosphere of the initial meeting. It should be noted too that another attending organization opted not to meet again with the other participants.

GETTING TO KNOW YOU: MID-SPRING – FALL 2000

Six months later, in mid-April 2000, the four organizations met for the first time as an intentional collaborating group. Although the group had the assistance of a funder-supported facilitator, member organizations themselves participated without funding during this initial period. When members later reflect on this early period, they assert the importance of spending time to get to know each other's organizations and programs, and to determine whether and how they might benefit from the interaction. One participant frames the process as largely a time to develop "trust" based on the "philosophies and strategies" underpinning organizational activities and programs. Such knowledge, all agree, takes time to cull.

At the same time, members vividly recall the challenges and frustrations of those initial months. A sense of confusion repeatedly arises in participants' comments on that period, a sense that the group's interactions had "little shape There were no minutes, no agendas for meetings – at least nothing that was passed out; maybe [the facilitator] had an agenda [but we didn't know what it was]." The participant continues:

At first, we didn't know what was relevant. There was confusion, with little organization or structure. We learned facts about each other, but without much organization; we talked about random things – for example, the calendar – but without any context. And had abstract discussions about early literacy.

A representative from a different organization says it was "a group in search of a focus." And a member from still a third organization comments that it took "a while to grasp that while there was no initiating vision, there *could* be a vision."

The tension between the time-consuming process of developing knowledge of and trust in each other, on one hand, and members' need for a sense of logic and progress, on the other, is not unusual. Moreover, such tension is not unique to the early stages of collaboration, although these periods can be especially trying. Collaboration in general, even at its most efficient and productive, can be a very demanding undertaking. It is often problematic for members to settle the most basic logistics – when and where to meet – let alone deal with more complex issues of roles, authority, responsibility, and power-sharing.

At the same time, AELC partners agree that the initial feeling-out period, while necessary, went on much too long. It was only as members focused on concrete possibilities for joint endeavors that conversations gained the immediacy, direction, and specificity that allowed a sense of shared purpose.

MOVING TOWARD AND BEYOND A “PACKAGE OF SERVICES”: FALL 2000 – MID-SPRING 2002

During this period, AELC members created its “package of services” (described below), identified and visited possible sites for implementation, negotiated agreements for the program to work with a Head Start program and child care center, both in Brooklyn, and began implementation. Members used a number of strategies to build on and shape the early open-ended period of exchanging information, initiating relationships, and building trust. These strategies, which aimed to structure collaborative efforts and promote the development of joint work, included the following:

- Framing discussions as a shared exploration of ways the separate organizations overlap and how they might complement each other programmatically.
- Fostering cross-organizational observations of programs, which Studio initiated with an invitation to all partners to attend its training sessions for its artists and see first-hand its teaching approaches. In Fall 2000, CIR began attending four such trainings. The interchange was important for both partners: CIR actually observed – rather than just heard about – Studio’s approach and Studio felt that CIR could now understand a core piece of its program.
- Scheduling regular monthly collaborative meetings and circulating agendas and minutes, beginning with the December 2000 meeting, at a point when the group began to discuss possible sites for implementing its service package (described below).

- Including program staff members from Studio, Jumpstart, and Best Practices at collaborative meetings, along with organizational directors; this both signaled the start of and furthered concrete, program-level work.⁶

The **package of services** meant to introduce ways to use art and books as creative experiences that (a) engage young children in the joy of discovery, (b) strengthen pre-literacy skills, and (c) form an arena for shared parent-child exploration, interaction, and learning. In large part, the package focused on professional development for the classroom teacher as the major program strategy. The aim was for the teachers to integrate the new skills in their interactions with children in the classroom and with parents in workshops. In addition, the package included services that directly reached center directors and individual children. The package components implemented in the two participating early childhood centers were:

- **CIR and Studio together: *Teacher training sessions.*** Four full-day sessions during the fall and early winter 2001-02 that brought together teachers from both participating centers. The sessions were meant to prepare teachers to run parent workshops, offering strategies that parents could use to engage in conversing, reading, and creating art with their children. Half the day focused on books and strategies for reading with 3- and 4-year-olds, led by CIR staff; the other half day, led by Studio artists, focused on hands-on art experiences that, over the four sessions, featured Studio's four core materials (collage, paint, wood, and clay). Each of the two organizations regularly conduct teacher training, but this combination format was an innovation for both groups.
- **Studio and CIR together: *Implementation meetings.*** Four meetings meant to assist the teachers in planning their parent workshops. The first meeting occurred before the first parent workshop and each subsequent meeting took place after a workshop, so teachers could debrief together and plan the following workshop.
- **CIR and Studio together: *Parent workshops.*** In February 2001, the teachers and artists began a series of four workshops in each of the participating centers. Two sessions focused on books (led by the teachers) and two on a hands-on art experience (led by the artists with the assistance of the teachers).
- **Studio: *Artists in the centers.*** As part of its regular program, Studio provided an artist and art materials in each center. The artist conducted weekly classroom sessions with children in four classrooms, including the two represented in the AELC program; led four center-wide teacher training sessions; and participated in the parent workshops described above. Studio chose two artists with strong interest in strengthening language use in the art activities, a desire to work with CIR's approach to books, and an ability to work collaboratively.

⁶ Center for Intergenerational Reading is a small, 2-person organization in which the organizational directors are the program staff and hence were participating in AELC meetings from the start.

- **Best Practices: *Director training sessions.*** A training series for center directors, including the two directors in the AELC program, that aimed to build their capacity to develop and support effective teaching skills among center faculty, especially regarding literacy readiness. An important feature was a Best Practices coach who worked with each participating director and one target classroom in her/his center to assess classroom practices and then assist the teachers in strengthening their teaching skills. This on-site work later became a critical component of the collaborative's own program.
- **Jumpstart: *College volunteers in a center.*** Jumpstart college volunteers worked in one of the AELC centers, spending one-on-one time with children who are selected by the center according to detailed criteria. In the selected center, some children from AELC classrooms participated in the Jumpstart program.

Toward the end of 2000, the collaborative began work to identify potential sites for program implementation, a process that necessarily raised the specific requirements of each organization member – such as centers with at least four classrooms with 3- and 4-year olds, mainly English-speaking populations, parents who would participate, and nearby public transportation. Juggling these and other requirements called for negotiated resolutions among the partners.

In addition, there were two funder-initiated events that promoted AELC members' reflection and articulation of goals and strategies. The first was a February 2001 meeting at the foundation for a collaborative update. In preparation for the meeting, the members created materials to present, including a written description of the relationship of each partner to the collaborative's package of services. Collaborative members met the Chapin Hall documenter at this meeting. The second was the start, in August, of Chapin Hall's documentation of the collaborative process. This included interviews and observations, with the aim of providing internal working memoranda for partners and the foundation on the collaborative and its program development process.

The "package of services" concept assembles members' diverse services into a joint offering at a site. The concept offers many advantages, among them: fostering cross-program communications; creating multiple links between the package and center administration; reinforcing professional development for center staff by reiterating lessons across service components; and placing programs in a web of services, thereby breaking the isolation that often surrounds outside providers. However, a package of services calls for *links between* – but not necessarily *integration of* – services.

At the same time, aspects of the work of Studio and CIR moved beyond the linked but parallel services. The CIR-Studio teacher training sessions served as the first arena where partners could try to integrate – rather than simply add-on – their program offerings. The workshop format called for joining the regular Studio and CIR trainings, but accenting, in CIR's work, a more explicit approach to the artwork in children's books and, in Studio's work, a more systematic alertness to incorporating language and books into the art-making experience.

A challenge in joining books and art lay in the tendency – among teachers and parents – to assess books and reading as legitimate educational fare and to consider art activities as recreational activities or pastimes that are fun but not “real education”. Staff members took a small step in recognizing and resolving this tension when, mid-way through the teacher training series, they decided to alternate between books and art as the start-off component for the full-day sessions. The change was made to emphasize that neither books nor art is subservient to the other; instead, both are legitimate educational experiences for children that can support each other in heightening the sense of discovery and creativity and the acquisition and practice of learning skills.

RESHAPING THE COLLABORATIVE: MID-SPRING – EARLY SUMMER 2002

In mid-spring 2002, a practical question arose: Will the collaborative and its joint program continue into the 2002-2003 school year? The collaborative partners, as well as the early childhood centers, had to know how to plan for the fall.

Yet, despite the growing time pressure, there was little action – individual or collective – to approach the foundation regarding continuation *as a collaborative*. Indeed, given funding cycles, some of the partnering organizations began to think about submitting proposals to the Altman Foundation for their own individual programs. Moreover, the group's facilitation continued to be low-key – essentially covering scheduling and note-taking tasks – and was not an option for fostering conversation about continuation. At the collaborative's request, the documenter alerted the foundation that the question was in the air.

At this point, the foundation played a critical role by calling a meeting to promote and help frame a conversation among members regarding the future of the collaborative and its work. During the meeting, the funder raised two critical areas to be addressed. First, developing a unified “program” aimed at a common purpose, thereby moving fully beyond the concept of a “package of services”. Such work requires partners to articulate a common theory of change, generate joint strategies, and practice a willingness to modify individual programs in order to create an integrated program among all components – not just those of Studio and CIR.

Second, the foundation asked partners to think about expanding the reach of the joint work. For example, developing contacts with new parties – as partners, sounding boards, advisory group members, or in some other role – as a way to access new knowledge and resources, reach wider or particularly relevant audiences, and possibly connect to a large entity, such as a university or college, that is working in similar areas but within a broader context. The funder also asked collaborative members to consider an evaluation of the program, to support program development, information dissemination, and assessment of links between program strategies and desired outcomes.

Collaborative members’ efforts to answer the continuation question, focusing on these two areas, led to still other questions about refining the goals of the program, altering the services, and defining more fully the collaborative. The funder asked the documenter to facilitate these continuing discussions. Eventually, the conversations blossomed into a full examination of the collaborative’s purpose and its work.

Major question marks from the start of discussions on the collaborative’s future revolved around the roles of Best Practices and particularly Jumpstart. Early on, Best Practices had stated its interest in developing its own program and its concomitant decision not to continue as a full collaborative member; instead it would use rollover monies to support limited involvement, which had to be defined. The role of Jumpstart was initially less clear, but then restructuring at the organization’s national level made continued participation in the collaborative impractical.

Studio and CIR became the mainstay partners going forward.

During the first year of implementation, the joint work between Studio and CIR provided the grounding for the collaborative’s growth. There had been little intentional planning among *all* partners – either early in the planning phase or in an ongoing way during program implementation. At the same time, the considerable planning between CIR and Studio in year 1 focused on linking together overlapping areas of existing program, instead of developing a fully fleshed-out theory of change. Now, with the program nearly a year old, group members had a solid basis on which to appraise their effort and consider how, if at all, they wanted the joint work to develop.

RECONCEPTUALIZING THE WORK: LATE SUMMER – FALL 2002

During the summer 2002, Studio and CIR began to create a unified program plan with strategic components, clear integrative mechanisms, and deliberate ways for components to interact and build on each other. But as time pressure built to make practical decisions and develop a concrete work plan for the 2002-03 school year, partners tended to move from a broad view of the program and its purpose and to focus on specific program components and logistics, such as selecting sites and developing a calendar for trainings, meetings, and workshops. As part of such planning, the group decided to extend program roles by recruiting new partners.

In late summer, the two partners decided that the role of teacher-mentor, originally part of the Best Practices program, had been an important means of supporting teachers in translating professional development lessons into actual classroom practice. This piece extended both Studio's and CIR's regular workshops and fit into the planned collaborative program. The Best Practices coach who had worked with the collaborative during the first year agreed to undertake the role of teacher-mentor, and her participation became a primary way Best Practices maintained contact with the program.

The collaborative also recruited Read to Me as a possible new member to add capacity to the reading component of the program. RTM – like CIR, a small, 2-person organization – focuses on engaging teen moms in the shared pleasures, mutual bonding, and learning experience of reading with their infant children. RTM joined the collaborative in the fall on a try-out basis.

At the same time, a fundamental question arose: Were there enough good reasons to continue the demanding work of maintaining the collaborative and its joint program? At this point, the collaborative was essentially a partnership between CIR and Studio, and there were concerns about the narrower range of opportunities to try new strategies, learn new perspectives, and draw on a broad and varied range of experience and resources. Initially, the four partners brought expertise in areas ranging from early childhood development, classroom assessment, pre-literacy skills, family literacy, professional development, and creativity and learning. Target audiences had included directors, teachers, parents, children, artists, and college students. With only two partners, some member representatives wondered whether a distinctive program could still be created. And, as a corollary, whether there were still enough reasons to continue the effort to collaborate.

Efforts to create the program plan for 2002-03 became a flashpoint of sorts, eliciting differences of opinion among participants, most immediately on the question of new partners. Yet, if done strategically, new partners held the possibility of broadening the program and opening up growing space in the collaborative. Read To Me stepped into this role in the work of the collaborative. Despite sharing interests with collaborative members, RTM's target group and context for and manner of work differed in major ways. For example, RTM

emphasized the importance of fun and engagement in reading for all readers and wanted an intentionally more informal, flexible, and relaxed air during the professional development sessions. Throughout much of year 2, RTM's role in the program remained unexplored and somewhat unclear. Yet, at key moments, RTM's different approach resonated with and reinforced what had been more minor notes in the collaborative's programmatic practice. RTM helped open up ways to highlight and create discussion around these underlying but sometimes less visible themes so the collaborative was able eventually to integrate them more fully into programmatic practice.

Decisions to participate in collaborative work are always tied to organizational assessments of whether and how collaborating will contribute to the organization. Collaborative work demands time and energy, often much more than work internal to an organization because substantial effort must be spent negotiating with partners. In the late summer, some members worried that this contribution would narrow because two, rather than four, organizations were involved. The question, at least for some, was whether the joint program – although promising – was, in itself and without further development, as far-reaching as the original collaboration potentially promised.

The ensuing conversation around this concern revealed two very different perspectives on the collaborative's joint program. Some participants felt an essential satisfaction with the CIR-Studio program and a need to allow the program to refine strategies and implement the lessons of the first program year, without the added pressure of rapid changes, new components, or external evaluation. Others argued that “the collaboration was meant to be more than just the coordinating of services, but a creating of something new,” a possibility that mandated new partners, a larger agenda, and expanded thinking. These perspectives suggest the differing levels of expected return on participation and commitment to the programmatic *status quo*.

GROWING INTO THE “ART IN READING”: FALL 2002 – SPRING 2003

At the start of the second year of implementation (2002-03), the collaborative was working with a year 1 site to help sustain implementation of the program; starting work with new program sites; bringing new artists into the program; and, of course, incorporating new collaborative partners. Studio and CIR were bringing their insights and experiences to bear on refining the program, and Read to Me and the on-site teacher mentor were providing the program and collaborative with new capacities and perspectives. There was a lot going on in the program – with necessary adjustments and some tensions as RTM staff and the mentor worked to learn the program, define their roles and, in the process, foster change in the established program. It was a time of growth and stretching.

The collaborative had come through the reshaping period, largely because the core partners were committed to the joint work. The work had become the *raison d'être* of the group, and through work, partners had some common bases for redefining organizational interests in and views of a future joint program. The point of being a member had shifted from participating in a collaborative to implementing and refining a joint endeavor. This can be seen in the group's title, which members officially changed from the "Altman Early Literacy Collaboration" to "Art In Reading," (AIR), a name that squarely emphasizes the work, not the group.

In the midst of all the questions, self-reflection, and collaborative changes, the fundamental structure, goals, and content of the joint program remained unchanged – joining the use of books and art as entry points into the joys and skills of learning; developing teachers' abilities to use the approach with children in classrooms and with parents in workshops; and fostering parents' abilities to expand their use of books and art in enhancing their interactions with their children. Enactment of these principles, however, developed in ways that enriched and strengthened the program. This happened through the engagement of the new partners and a structured process to delineate the AIR theory of change and practice.

- **Read To Me.** RTM's approach highlights the importance of engaging not only parents but teachers in the joys of children's books – the details, color, and liveliness of illustrations, play of words, and layout design and typeface – all reflecting the melding of art and narrative. RTM also frames books within a larger view of "reading" symbols, including facial expressions, gestures, and art, linking here with Studio's interest. These approaches were incorporated into the program through a wide array of books that RTM shared during the teacher training sessions, including wordless books of animal faces and books in Japanese, all awaiting interpretation because teachers and trainers alike had to "read" through the illustrations. As part of this broad framing of books and reading, RTM also introduced the use of an instant camera, capturing the faces of participants and then engaging all workshop members in interpreting the expressions. The books and camera exercises fostered, in concrete and accessible formats, an exploration of the process of symbolic interpretation that is present in all daily life, from a child's earliest days, but is often neither articulated as such nor linked to the processes of interpreting written texts and art and of making meaning through written and visual languages.
- **Teacher-Mentor.** The on-site teacher-mentor aimed to help teachers translate training lessons into classroom practice. As part of this effort, the teacher-mentor established relationships with each of the teachers, conducted baseline surveys of pre-literacy tools and activities in each target classroom, and created and implemented systematic coaching units at individual and small group levels. The teacher-mentor brought a stronger child-development perspective to the collaborative and a sense of the pace, demands, and challenges of teachers' work. Through her understanding of teachers' strengths and needs, the mentor helped shape the professional development sessions with an eye toward sustaining enhanced teaching practices and continuing parent workshops after the AIR program finished.

In addition to the internal program developments, the collaborative, with the help and support of the funder, considered linking with other institutions in order to build broader connections and embed the AIR work in a larger context. Collaborative members and the funder had meetings with administrators and program staff from the Bank Street College of Education and the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies. Eventually formal connections between AIR and these organizations did not work out, but the meetings helped sharpen AIR members' sense of the strengths, values, and interests of their program.⁷

- **Delineating the AIR theory of change and practice.** In fall 2002, the collaborative began a series of meetings to flesh out more fully its program goals and strategies and define the links between the program's strategies and expected outcomes. The Best Practices director led two meetings, in October 2002 and January 2003, in which collaborative members, the foundation program officer, and the documenter participated. Members discussed "outcomes" and "goals" as clearly and specifically as possible in order to: clarify the aims of each program component; spell out each component's relationship to the overall program; and strengthen the links between the strategies and goals of the overall program.

The October and January sessions focused on three main areas: defining the target audiences for program efforts and the expected outcomes; identifying ways to measure specific expected program impacts on these audiences; and determining how to assess the likelihood of achieving desired outcomes, even in advance of a formal evaluation.

Participants also used the discussion to guide an examination of their own program components and (1) identify their program's priority targets, (2) delineate a few expected outcomes per target; (3) specify observable indicators that reflect program progress and achievements; and (4) detail the link between the program's strategies and the expected outcomes.

In March, with the assistance of the documenter, the collaborative began a second series of periodic meetings to address specific questions that had arisen out of the AIR program and carried broad implications for program goals and strategies. These questions included: What are the connections between art and books? Between reading and creating art? Why are these two program pieces put together in trainings and workshops? What are effective ways to train teachers to use art and books in their classrooms and parent workshops? What is the role of each partner in the collaborative program, especially of the two new partners?

⁷ Somewhat indirectly, the meetings with the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies did become a potential funnel for future dissemination of lessons learned from AIR. Studio's Request for Proposals for new sites to participate in Studio's regular early childhood program, which was building on AIR experiences and lessons, was sent to FPWA sites.

The meetings built on the insights and approaches of all partners and especially used the work of the new partners to look at the program from different angles. Meetings continued throughout the spring and early summer, as partners increasingly focused on using their reflections to frame the practical work of structuring the next year's program. The joining of practical considerations with more theoretical questions helped to ground and focus the discussions and ensure that a unified program framework – including goals and strategies – was reflected across program components. It also meant that there were strategies to reach all goals.

The work, promoted by the funder, of reflecting on and articulating the theory of change and practice embedded in the program proved very useful. Collaborative members gained the means to elaborate, in intentional ways, program practices that strengthen both the strategies and linkages to expected outcomes. For example, when CIR recognized that the professional development sessions enhanced teachers' skills in the classroom as well as prepared them to conduct parent workshops, there was more intentional effort to build classroom practice. In a similar way, as Studio experienced the feasibility of developing teachers' ability to lead the art component of the parent workshops, artists paid greater attention to transmitting lessons on ways to do that.

There was a more generalized lesson as well: the value of and capacity to be reflective about the collaborative work, to question each other about the feasibility of particular aspects of the work, and to suggest change when needed.

PROGRAM YEAR 3: FALL 2003 – SUMMER 2004

The collaborative process has sparked an energetic and creative joint effort among AIR partners and in producing a distinct and popular program. In September 2003, the collaborative started its third year of implementation with a refined program focused on enhancing young children's, teachers' and parents' experiences with art and books at home and in school; increasing parents' involvement with their children and their learning; and strengthening home-school connections. There are now 27 program classrooms across seven centers – including three new sites – in low-income neighborhoods in Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Manhattan.

The third year program makes clear links between strategies and goals. With its focus on the intersections among books and art, symbolic representation, early childhood learning, and the strengths and needs of early childhood teachers, the program merges partners' perspectives, experiences, and expertise. Collaborative members together have created an integrated program, distinct from member organizations' own programs and far beyond a compilation of add-on components. Members have been – and continue to be – engaged in dynamic interaction with each other, working to delineate and refine a sound theory of practice for their program.

Partners are also aiming to achieve program sustainability by eventually working with every appropriate teacher in a center – a few each year – and by providing support as AIR-trained teachers continue to offer parent workshops even as they graduate out of the program. In addition, collaborative partners are developing their own means of program documentation, filming the teacher training and parent workshop components of the program, conducting feedback processes for teachers and parents, and developing detailed program guides and instructional materials. Moreover, partners are presenting on the AIR program in a range of forums.⁸

Perhaps even more important, they are in dynamic interaction with the challenges of implementing their theory of practice as fully as possible. This has demanded a willingness – individually and collectively – to push organizational as well as collaborative boundaries, take on different perspectives and tasks, and develop new skills. It is in these interactions – with each other and with the vision of their joint program – that collaboration can fulfill expectations for innovative reflection and action. It is fitting to end the case study by observing the ongoing vitality of such reflection. The program description for a collaborative presentation at the November 2003 National Association of Educators of Young Children’s Conference reads:

The practice of making art and the practice of reading and writing both involve a process of symbolic representation of thoughts and ideas. As young children explore different art materials and art techniques they naturally expand their ability to express themselves through the language of art. When children are then encouraged to talk about their artwork, and their words are written down for them by an adult, they make a natural transition into understanding they can communicate in different ‘languages’, and that these languages (the spoken word, art and text) are connected.⁹

A collaborative members recently penned this addition: “The practice of making *and interpreting* art and the practice of reading and writing both involve a process of symbolic representation of thoughts and ideas.” Further, she comments:

We have been neglecting to mention the interpretation part, which is the counterpart of the reading. [This] makes our connection between the parallel activities rather lopsided, for making art is to writing as interpreting art is to reading, is it not?

The interaction, challenge, and potential of collaboration continue apace.

⁸ CIR and Studio, with an AIR artist, at the “Face to Face” conference sponsored by the New York City Arts in Education Roundtable; Studio, CIR, and the documenter at the 2003 annual meeting of the National Association of Educators of Young Children; CIR at both the 19th and 20th World Congress of Reading of the International Reading Association; and Studio at the National Art Education Association’s conference in April 2004.

⁹ From “The Art in Reading: Professional Development as a Route to New Strategies for Teachers and New Experiences for Parents,” a program description prepared for the National Association of Educators of Young Children Conference, Chicago, November 6, 2003, page 4.

LESSONS FROM THE AIR COLLABORATIVE

The work and growth of AELC/AIR give rise to a number of pivotal lessons for the collaborative members themselves and for others interested in uses of a collaborative strategy. As the case history indicates, not only have many of these lessons been hard won, but they continue to help guide the AIR work. *Perhaps that is the primary lesson: the work of collaboration is never static and it is never finished. Instead, collaboration must be practiced not only to be effective, but to exist at all.*

Another remarkable aspect of the AIR experience has been the development of a *vigorous dynamic between the collaborative and its program*. On one side of the dynamic, collaborative members worked to develop a joint program, drawing on resources from all partners. On the other side, the program, as it went into implementation, demanded that partners push beyond the boundaries of their own organizational practices and programs to implement their joint vision. The dynamic has resulted the distinct AIR program that integrates perspectives and strategies from multiple partners – and differs from all other program of any of the participating organizations. It has also meant new directions and capacities in each of the partner organizations. CIR, for example, now explores more fully the art in children’s books in its conversational reading strategies. And Studio has refined and expanded its focus on pre-literacy skills in its other early childhood programs and trains all its early childhood artists in these skills, not just those in the AIR program.

Other lessons critical to collaborative progress include the following.

- **Joint work – that is, a concrete, purposeful program of activity – is crucial in developing and sustaining collaboration.**

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| Common work forms the core of a strong collaborative. It is through specific work, with commonly agreed upon goals(s), interrelated strategies, and shared responsibility and accountability that collaborative partners are able to enact and strengthen their joint endeavor. |
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The AELC/AIR collaborative picked up steam at the point when joint work framed partner discussions – as opposed to more abstract discussions focusing on organizational values or approaches to early childhood services. By concentrating on work, participants could relate to each other’s experience, skills, and resources in practical and purposeful ways.

In addition, collaboration is stronger when partners’ efforts center on developing and implementing a new program. Such work helps generate a sense of identity, purpose, and progress, linking collaborative members to each other in ways that are distinct from each member’s organizational identity. The joint work overlaps with members’ organizational work, but also stands as an entity on its own. This may be especially true in a self-defining, self-motivating, voluntary collaborative such as AELC/AIR.

- **Effective collaboration requires the engagement of organizations' self-interests.**

Organizational self-interest is a powerful force that can support or oppose efforts to collaborate. When members are able to weave their organizational self-interests into the work of a collaborative, the process simultaneously can strengthen collaborative efforts and organizations' commitment to the joint work.

In the AELC/AIR collaborative, it is significant that partners mentioned the opportunity to learn from each other as a major reason for joining and/or remaining with the collaborative during its early months. Two members in particular carried a strong sense of the link between collaborating and the meeting of specific expectations. Studio saw collaboration as an opportunity to learn more about language development in early childhood and to explore ways to incorporate that learning into its own work. CIR anticipated expanding the reach of its program as well as broadening its approach to books to include art and the creative process. The clarity and specificity of these links have been useful in fostering organizational commitment and collaborative development for a number of reasons:

- ✓ Learning from one's peers requires a degree of openness to the experiences and expertise of others.
- ✓ Expectations of learning from peers implies that each organization values the expertise of its partners, a quality that, in this case, was heightened because of differences among partners' approaches to teaching and learning. Here, Studio's clear and distinct interest in learning how to support pre-literacy skills through art, rather than books or language, has been particularly useful. Studio staff have been able to raise questions and push conversations in a learning, and not competitive, mode and at the same time bring their own expertise to the table.
- ✓ Staff development extends beyond those sitting at the collaborative table. Studio artists, for example, have benefited directly through their work with CIR in preparation for the teacher professional development sessions.

Studio's and CIR's clarity of purpose and its translation into action were vital to the early collaboration because it helped create and focus direction and momentum. In year 2, their steadfast commitment to the program, along with the fresh perspectives of the two new partners, led to greater articulation and deepening and broadening of the program's goals and strategies.

- **Collaborative work demands that partners be "fully invested" in the enterprise:** Full investment in a collaborative reflects a member's assessment that there is meaningful work to be done and such work meets some organizational self-interest, both discussed above. One Altman collaborative member specifically links investment and self-interest, pointing out that full investment requires a sense that collaborating "will benefit the

organization on a broader level than just providing service." During AELC/AIR's first year, the lack of a sense of direction or progress made such investment difficult at times for busy people with multiple ongoing responsibilities. As one participant points out, although "the foundation [was] able to provide resources," it could not provide time, a commodity that these organizational and program directors have to be deliberate about spending. Despite the confusion of this period, however, members felt the group had enough potential to create a worthwhile program and support members' professional and organizational development to justify continued participation.

Full investment goes beyond a willingness to spend time and effort to develop a collaborative and the collaborative's work. It also requires a willingness to practice flexibility and openness to the needs, approaches, and expertise of partners. Often, it is the successful practice of give and take, rather than the easy agreement, which tests and strengthens collaborative relationships.

The need for full investment was underlined in AELC because the core partners – Studio and CIR – were working to develop a coherent, integrated program that melded organizational philosophies and approaches while at the same time maintaining organizational integrity. This is quite a different challenge than trying, as in an additive approach, to create linkages among existing programs; for example, by developing a common referral system or shared data or other resources, or a program with distinct component parts for which different organizations have responsibility.

Such commitment to the program deepened over the first year for Studio and CIR. During the following summer, these members were able to distill lessons about collaboration and about the joint program, weather the departure of two original organizations, and work to explore and incorporate the perspectives and skills of new partners. In many ways, it is this practice of will – rooted in a common belief in the program – that exemplifies full investment at its best.

- **Such investment can be costly for organizational partners.** During the planning year, all partners invested in the collaborative effort without foundation support. In a sense, partners took a leap of faith that such investment would bear organizational, as well as collaborative, fruit. A collaborative member says:

[I]t is an important internal issue for each collaborating group because, when designated support is not provided for [collaborative work], then time is drawn away from the core functions of the agency, to their detriment. The enhancements and opportunity for growth provided by the collaboration need to outweigh the cost of drawing (human) resources away from regular programs. This can only happen if successful innovations and substantial and relevant new knowledge and skills are invested back into the core programs.

- **A sense of progress with the collaborative *and* its work is vital for continued investment:** The collaborative’s flexibility during the planning year and first year of implementation highlight the importance of a sense of progress for continued participation. Flexibility had been intrinsic to the collaborative from its start, probably related to the original openness regarding aims and outcomes. Member organizations had the room and time to develop their own relationships to the collaborative’s services, participating in the package of services in different ways and according to their own timetable.

Essentially, however, Studio and CIR formed the programmatic nucleus around which the other two members joined their own more parallel work. During the first implementation year, the CIR-Studio workshops provided visible results of joint work. They also reflected members’ ability to collaborate successfully – that is, to modify their programs so they merged and yet retained their individual approaches; to extend their approaches; and to develop appreciation of each other’s medium (books or art materials). The two organizations embraced the notion of learning from each other in order to create a new program and to develop their own organizational capacities.

By the end of the first year of implementation, it became clear that flexibility in the collaborative had worked throughout the year *because* the interlinked Studio and CIR work provided the collaborative with a sense of progress, success, and tangible programmatic reasons to continue together.

When members considered refining and modifying the program for year 2, the sense of progress and success of *their* joint component allowed CIR and Studio to enter fully into such planning. Best Practices and Jumpstart, on the other hand, found that their add-on components generated neither full organizational investment nor enough benefits to justify continued participation. There was less “fit” between the collaborative core of the program – and its success – and the purpose and work of each of these organizations.

- **Similarities and differences among partners help build collaboration:** Shared commonalities help form a platform on which partners can develop constructive discussion and interchange, as well as approaches for specific and serious planning. At the same time, organizational differences in mission and strategies can allow partners to find areas for complimentary exchange and learning. These similarities and differences are especially potent when partners share such organizational attributes as a strong sense of the value of their own work, a desire to extend and enrich their programs while maintaining their own central mission and identity, and a willingness to expend organizational resources in order to be involved in the collaboration. It is also useful if top administrators and program managers are involved in the collaborative effort in an ongoing way and are allowed to use decision-making authority to further the work of the collaborative.

In the case of the AELC/AIR collaborative, the current partners' shared interest in pre-literacy, the common strategy of workshops or trainings to build adult capacity to share books and art with children, and the use of a specific medium – books and the shared reading experience, art materials and the creative process, or classroom tools and techniques – through which to implement practice were important in enabling partners to envision a joint enterprise. Equally critical were the differences between the two programs, particularly in approaching learning experiences from different angles and through different media. These differences allowed each organization both to continue its own work and yet through the collaboration, enhance and extend that work.

In part, these attributes afforded the elbowroom for partners to talk across their similarities, share their differences, and try to find ways to work together and learn from each other. The differences and similarities provided a range of expertise and experience as collaborative resources.

- **Collaboration needs internal supports and mechanisms:** Organizational structures are important for giving shape to collaborative efforts. This can be seen particularly sharply in a group such as AELC/AIR, which initially had no charge and purpose and met without an externally imposed timeline. When the collaborative first began to meet, the facilitator at the time, stating a sensitivity to the pitfalls of imposing structure, refrained from even issuing minutes and agendas, and worked to create an atmosphere in which structures would arise from group members themselves. Yet, with few guideposts, this was hard for participants to accomplish. It was also difficult for them to have a sense of progress because there was no stated (albeit evolving) objective for what they were doing, no identified mechanisms for reflecting about where they had been, and no means for understanding the logic behind the group process or ways to shape it.

Mechanisms of continuity – for example, partners setting tasks for themselves to present at the next meeting, memos highlighting issues from previous meetings, and processes for setting agendas – are also important for collaborative members. These are intentional efforts to help keep collaborative work from getting lost in the organizational demands and routines of members' day-to-day responsibilities. One group member says:

Participation in the collaboration would have been great as a full-time job. But of course it couldn't be. I would often get revved up at a meeting, but then get back to the office and involved in the work of the organization – and it doesn't take long for the collaboration to feel so removed, to forget the energy.

Supports and mechanisms provide the institutional glue holding together the frequently amorphous collaborative process.

- **Collaboratives need external supports and perspectives.**

The foundation's role as catalyst. The Altman Foundation has been crucial, balancing periods of unobtrusive support with periods of active participation during key turning points in the group's development. The initial gathering of organizations, hosted by the foundation, clearly set the early, broad parameters for the collaborative as well as formed the platform for joint work. One grantee says in retrospect that the funder was:

. . . really remarkable in creating a supportive framework--support without great expectations. This was not a group of competitors. . . .The invitation was to the directors to extend their expertise, hear each other; it was a wonderful dictum to the group. To really learn about each other and to see each other as partners.

In addition, as described above, the foundation provided a forum, the means, and the impetus to reexamine and redefine basic expectations, roles, and goals at critical moments in the development of the collaborative and its joint work. For example, at the end of the first year of implementation, the funder offered the auspices for pushing potentially tense, internal issues — about partners' levels of commitment and contribution and the fit between organizational and collaboration needs. During year two of implementation, the funder's questions on ways to share the work with broad and varied audiences, the possibility of new partners or associates, program evaluation and documentation, and generally how to move program goals and operations to broader arenas reflected the foundation's support and expectations for program growth.

Ongoing documentation and facilitation. Support for engaged, ongoing documentation and facilitation also reflects the funder's role as a catalyst for the collaborative. As discussed above, the documentation began as members prepared for and moved into the first year of implementation; at the end of that year, the researcher also undertook facilitation tasks. The documentation and facilitation roles built on each other. The documentation memos served to stimulate reflection and conversation about the dynamics of collaborative interactions, decision-making, and program development. Facilitation can entail a variety of tasks, but overall, a facilitator can assist the collaborative process in the following ways:

- ✓ Help members develop and implement group practices: These might include such basics as establishing a practice of rotating chair duties for collaborative meetings and ways to create meeting agendas and meeting minutes, as well as more complex processes as decision-making.
- ✓ Make sure there are open communications: Ensuring that everyone is kept in the loop, especially in terms of access to information and decision-making.
- ✓ Act as a "sounding board" for individual organizations and as a "liaison" among organizations: The facilitator can act as both an outsider and an insider to the collaborative: as an outsider with no organizational self-interest in the

collaborative or its program; as an insider with inside knowledge. For example, the sounding board/liaison approach may enable the facilitator to identify and frame points where organizations overlap in their interests or concerns, or strategies that might be the basis for next steps, areas for further conversation, or even joint work.

- ✓ Raise broader questions in an ongoing way: The facilitator can help set the tone for group discussions by using probing questions to generate discussion of the collaborative's vision, goals, and purpose. These might be questions that draw on prior conversations with individuals, summarize group discussions, articulate an underlying theme, take a long-term look at where the collaborative wants to go, and so forth.
- ✓ Encourage reflection: Including helping establish the venues and processes by which members can take the time to step back from their work, assess it, and make deliberate decisions about its overall direction and strategies. Collaborative partners often strive to maintain a democratic ethos. It can be difficult for one partner or another to initiate an examination of collaborative/program efforts, for example, or raise contrary perspectives to a practice in place. The facilitator can help raise such issues, sometimes by placing them within the broader context of the program's theory of practice and goals.

CONCLUSION

Collaboration is often spoken of as a strategy to reduce program redundancies or to create efficiencies of scale, or to stretch resources by drawing on multiple organizations. In this initiative, collaboration has been put to perhaps its most exciting use: the creation of a new program and development and enhancement of the interests and skills of each participating organizations. It has provided the means for these organizations to explore, nurture, and practice – in ways that none could have done on their own – their belief in the following principle:

It's valuable to link art and literacy since they provide two essential and complementary pathways into gaining new knowledge, developing and practicing language and communication skills, and fostering emotional engagement in the process of learning.¹⁰

¹⁰ From "The Art in Reading: Professional Development as a Route to New Strategies for Teachers and New Experiences for Parents," page 2.