Making it work: Collaborative working to meet the needs of young people at risk

Collaborative engagement between public agencies, aimed at achieving common goals, has become more important in recent years. Using Activity Theory as a framework for analysis, this project examined such interagency working at three sites, two within a school's learning community and a third involving statutory and voluntary agencies. The sites were chosen to reflect specific features of Northern Ireland, denominationalism in education and the significance of the voluntary sector, to assess their impact on collaborative learning.

- Effective collaboration is strengthened by relationships of trust among the key partners. These enhance commitment and permit risk-taking

  → Collaborative working will be strengthened if attention is given to human factors and relationship-building

- Commitment to collaborative working is enhanced and deepened when it is seen to lead to tangible outcomes

  → Sustainable collaboration depends on the identification of meaningful activities with discernible outcomes

- Effective collaboration is related to the autonomy available to key partners and the role of external bodies. Rules set outside this context may constrain effective collaboration

  → Processes should be established to allow for the critical examination of rules and the influence of external agencies

The research

Context of the Study

Social exclusion usually happens when people or areas suffer from a combination of factors that link together to create and reinforce disadvantage. In these contexts, there are multiple, interacting problems to solve. Solutions depend on effective collaboration between a number of different agencies. We know that the history of such 'joined up' practice is at best problematic. Effective collaboration involves more than simply bringing the right people together in one room. How they engage, between themselves and with their host agency, involves processes of learning that were the main focus of this project.

We were linked to the TLRP Learning in and for Interagency Working project at the Universities of Bath, Birmingham and Oxford (http://www.tlrp.org/proj/phase111/daniels.htm) which addressed this problem. It used conceptual and methodological tools derived from Activity Theory to understand dialogue, multiple perspectives and networks of interacting activity. Its focus was on agencies working to meet the needs of young teenagers at risk of dropping out of education. Our project extended this work to research sites in Northern Ireland.

The rationale for using sites in Northern Ireland was to extend the range of settings available for analysis. For historical reasons, the school system in Northern Ireland is characterised by a high degree of denominational control and weak local authorities. In addition, a large voluntary sector developed during the years of political violence, and in the absence of a locally elected political assembly, to provide alternative forms of community leadership as well as significant employment opportunities. Parts of the voluntary sector came to play a major role in service delivery.

The original aims of the project were to examine inter-agency working in Northern Ireland with a view to improving the capacity for learning in agencies engaged in collaborative work and to improve outcomes for young people at risk of social exclusion.

Research Methodology

The research strategy had three main stages. The first involved pre-intervention baseline measures through interviews with 20 professionals in local authorities, schools and relevant community organisations, and preparatory work towards identifying appropriate research sites in Northern Ireland. Three sites were identified for further work: two within a school learning partnership and the third involving collaboration between statutory and voluntary agencies.

The second stage involved intensive fieldwork within the research sites. Ten modified versions of the change laboratory method (Development Work Research-DWR) were run with those engaged in interagency work at the research sites to draw out aspects of their professional activity and to highlight tensions, dilemmas and alternative ways of working. Parallel work was carried out with the practitioners to expand the objects of professional activity (see figure one).
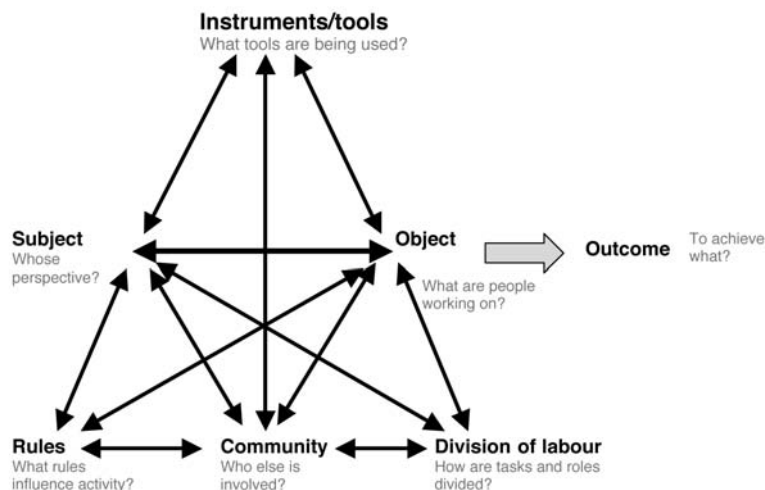
The third and final stage involved the collection of post-intervention data to enable a direct comparison between all aspects of the baseline data set and in all the England and Northern Ireland contexts. We also carried out respondent validation exercises and dissemination activities, and began the development of networks to sustain the learning from the project.

Figure 1: Activity system used in DWR

The three research sites for this study reflected the distinctive context provided by the Northern Ireland strand of the wider project activity.

- The first two were based in a post-primary school learning partnership. The partnership included Controlled and Catholic Maintained schools, a special school, the local FE college, alternative education provision, a behavioural support unit, professionals from the Education and Library Board (the local authority), and professionals from community and voluntary groups. At one site we focused on the leaders of the partnership and their strategic role. At the other we concentrated on school-based Multiagency Support Teams which identified strategies for 'at risk' young people and engaged with agencies external to the schools.

- The third was a collaborative project aimed at the needs of looked after children. The lead organisation in this project was a voluntary agency, but most of the other partners were drawn from statutory agencies, including the Department of Education, the Northern Ireland Office and the Department of Heath, Social Services and Public Safety. Professionals from three major charities were also involved in the collaboration.

Key findings from the research

The interviews carried out in the first stage of the research confirmed the importance of collaborative working in Northern Ireland, and the perception among key professionals that it could be carried out more effectively. The policy context in Northern Ireland is not yet as prescriptive as in England, in that multi-agency working is not formally required. But in many areas of social policy, there has been a tendency for Northern Ireland to follow practice in England after a short time-lag. This may be to the good. There is no doubt that there are significant problems of social exclusion in Northern Ireland, and there is a consensus that these can only be addressed effectively through collaborative methods.

The first set of conclusions emerging from our work on the three research sites in Northern Ireland highlighted a number of particular themes related to effective practice. These included:

Personal relationships are crucial. Underpinning much of the early work in the research sites was a commitment from key professionals based on their personal relationships and trust. This helped to secure commitment to collaboration when the outcomes were aspirational rather than tangible, provided significant symbolic leadership to people working within the participating organisations who

were not directly involved in collaborative work, and provided a context within which the participants could take risks. The corollary was that collaborative working may be vulnerable to changes in key personnel.

Proximity is useful but not essential. It was clear, and seems self-evident, that proximity facilitates effective collaboration while distance presents challenges. However, it was possible to explore and develop new tools to facilitate collaboration at a distance. Experience had already been gained in the development of new tools and new ways of working, such as a re-imagination of the school timetable,to allow for travel time, and extending the school day to increase flexibility, since even close proximity is only a benefit if other key systems are in alignment. Other tools such as ICT can also facilitate access to teaching and learning resources when partners are not in close proximity.

Moving from informal practice to formal systems. Much of the new practice that developed in our research sites grew out of innovation developed through informal links between the professionals involved in collaborative engagement. A key role for the professionals was to capture this informal practice and move towards greater commonality by creating formal arrangements for collaborative working.

Engagement in meaningful collaborative activities. Collaboration was more sustainable when professionals were involved in meaningful activities which benefited both the host organisation and the collaborative operation. Aspirational goals and human factors may be needed to establish a momentum for collaborative engagement, but concrete outcomes are necessary to sustain it.

Recognition of the different identities of professionals and organisations in collaborative settings. The research highlighted awareness of the different identities of the professionals and organisations involved in collaboration. In contrast to experience at some of the English sites, this was generally viewed as a strength of collaborative working, as it expanded the repertoire of actions available to the partners. We saw little or no evidence of identity dilemmas for those involved in collaborative working.

Being flexible and responsive to systems. Effective collaboration involved profession-als having explicit expert knowledge of their systems. Innovation could only be built upon expert knowledge of existing systems. It was sometimes necessary to know systems well enough to know how they could be circumvented. This was particularly true for rules or systems imposed on the partnership by external agencies.

Extending buy-in to all stakeholders. An important aspect of collaborative working

Major implications

Our research highlights many contexts which necessitate interagency working. At our research sites, collaboration involved professionals from education, health, social care and youth justice working in both the statutory and voluntary sectors. Our work not only focused on professionals working with young people but also on how professionals worked on and in the systems in place to support young people. It is our intention to suggest elements which support effective collaboration through this work. We will also suggest changes in how professionals can work together and how systems can support this new approach.

Effective collaboration is not simply a technical exercise. Since it involves the development of new ways of working, it requires participants to develop processes that encourage innovation. This will require detailed understanding of existing processes, and a preparedness to consider ways in which they might change or evolve to meet new challenges and circumstances. The findings of this study suggest that there are three main priorities in taking this forward:

- Relationships of trust promote momentum towards collaboration and create contexts within which people feel able to take risks to develop innovative practice. Active attention to human factors and processes that develop social capital may be important in building trust and sustaining a pattern of relationships which supports collaborative engagement. Ironically, this highlights a particular problem with effective collaboration. Normally it is desirable to encourage an environment within which all assumptions are open to challenge in the interests of developing innovation. But personnel changes among key partners may produce instability or uncertainty in the partnership.

- If the momentum of collaboration is to be maintained, the direct participants must see tangible benefits. So collaboration should focus on meaningful activities with discernible outcomes. There should be tangible benefits for those who are directly involved in the collaborative activities. When one goal of collaboration is to deepen the penetration of collaborative practice within the participating organisations, buy-in from stakeholders is more likely if they see evidence of discernible benefit. Some participants in collaborative partnerships will need the permission of their host organisations. This is more likely to be achieved if they are able to act as effective bridges between the partnership and their host, with discernible benefits being evident to both sides.

- The rules set by external organisations, whether they are directly involved in the partnership or not, can act as a constraint on effective collaboration and innovation. This gives these agencies a crucial role in setting the parameters within which a collaborative partnership has to work. The greater their direct involvement in the collaboration, the less the risk becomes that they will limit its effectiveness. Where they are not directly involved there needs to be some mechanism (other than rule-breaking) for the critical examination of inappropriate constraints. External agencies can also apply constraints when cultural norms limit the capacity of participants to engage critically with key issues. In the Northern Ireland context, the key cultural constraint is related to sectarianism and politico-religious divisions. But while this context is unique to Northern Ireland, similar constraints can be found within different settings and with different motivations.

involved the extension or deepening of the work to wider networks of stakeholders. Strategic leadership was needed to extend the range of collaborative activity into the sites, increase the number of people directly involved and extend the penetration of partnership activity. Professionals also had a bridging role between the diverse agencies involved in the partnership.

Knowing who are the key people to involve. The repertoire of knowledge and options available to a partnership is determined by the people and agencies that are involved directly. Key absences do occur and they are usually not terminal, but they do set limits on the possibilities for collaborative practice. This may also affect the stability of the collaboration.

The role of external agencies. Their role is highlighted in the Activity Theory model. In our sites they took on a particular importance in conjunction with the rules

governing behaviour. External bodies could constrain or support work within the collaborative partnership. Bodies which provided support tended also not to challenge the autonomy of the partnership and enforced only minimal constraints through the rules they imposed on the partnership's actions. Instead they enabled activities or avoided sanctioning them. Other bodies provided little tangible support, but exerted significant constraints through the imposition of rules which sometimes got in the way of effective collaborative activity. This effect was mediated by a wider social grammar of avoidance, or silence, which has developed in Northern Ireland as a coping mechanism to deal with division and sectarianism. This reduced people's willingness to name the constraints on their actions publicly. This emphasises the importance of external agencies, and the value of human factors and trust in effective collaborative engagement.

Further information

Information on the project findings, and electronic copies of project publications, can be found at the project website www.tlrp.org/proj/gallagher.html and the website of the linked project run by the Universities of Bath, Birmingham and Oxford www.tlrp.org/proj/phase111/daniels.htm

Key theoretical work on this area is led by the Centre for Activity Theory and Developmental Work Research at the University of Helsinki. Information on its activities and publications can be found at: www.edu.helsinki.fi/activity/

A number of other activities have developed from this project, most notably a research and development project aimed at promoting cross-denominational school collaboration in Northern Ireland. Reports on activities and research findings from that and related projects can be found at www.schoolsworkingtogether.co.uk

The warrant

The findings of this project were based on a three stage research strategy. The first stage involved 20 one-to-one interviews and two multiagency focus groups with professionals across the whole of Northern Ireland. The purpose of this stage was to establish an overall picture of collaborative working in Northern Ireland and assess the extent to which professionals engaged in this work were concerned to improve or develop existing practice. In addition, the first stage would be used to identify potential research sites for more detailed scrutiny.

The evidence gathered in the first stage of the project highlighted the fact that the pressure for collaborative working was not as formalised in Northern Ireland as in England. However the professionals in Northern Ireland engaged in this work did identify limitations and weaknesses in current practice. There was also evident enthusiasm among agencies for developing better ways of carrying out multiagency working.

The second stage involved work in three research sites, generating ten modified versions of the Developmental Work Research workshop method. In addition, we undertook 80 interviews with professionals working in the research sites, observed multiagency meetings and carried out three focus groups with young people. This range of approaches allowed for data triangulation and the testing of emergent themes from the workshops in different contexts.

The third stage involved dissemination seminars. Meetings with participants from the research sites were used to provide a context in which respondents were consulted in order to validate our interpretations and explanations of the data collected for respondent validation. Meetings involving wider professional and policy audiences were used to test their response to the emerging conclusions.

Teaching and Learning Research Programme
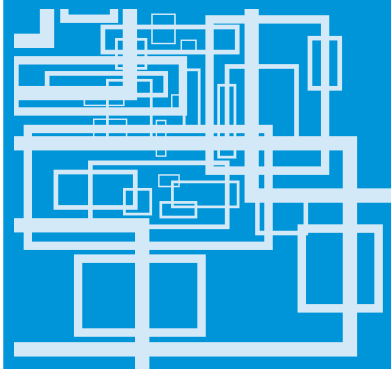
TLRP involves over 60 research teams with contributions from England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Work began in 2000 and will continue to 2011.

Learning: TLRP's overarching aim is to improve outcomes for learners of all ages in teaching and learning contexts across the UK.

Outcomes: TLRP studies a broad range of learning outcomes, including the acquisition of skill, understanding, knowledge and qualifications and the development of attitudes, values and identities relevant to a learning society.

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