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Developing multi-professional working: teams, communities of practice or networks?

Tim Simkins, [Ros Garrick](#)

Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, United Kingdom

Background

Major changes have taken place in the delivery of children's services in England and in the other countries of the UK over the last decade. The Every Child Matters agenda, which now informs a range of relevant policies, confirms multi-professional teamwork as the predominant method for the delivery of children's services. The problematic nature of partnership working, such as sharing power, building trust, and reconciling conflicting perspectives is well documented. Providing effective support for multi-professional teams in these contexts poses particular challenges, both in the content of development programmes and the ways in which participants are engaged and training is delivered.

Research Questions

The aim of this paper is to explore the factors which influence the effectiveness of formal development programmes targeted at multi-agency teams in children's services. The paper draws on two studies of the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services' Multi-Agency Teams Development (MATD) programme which is designed to enable 'participants to develop team-working skills and behaviours so they can address the challenges of delivering the outcomes resulting from the ECM agenda'. The programme recruits teams of professionals who are working, or who expect to work, together in a multi-agency context and supports them through a number of development events underpinned by a project which they carry out together on a problem of shared concern.

Methods

The two studies on which the paper draws are a follow-up study of the pilot programme which took place in 2005/06 and a study of the first phase of the roll-out which commenced in 2008. Each study embodied a similar case study methodology, using telephone interviews and focus groups to explore perceptions of the quality of the programme and its impact on practice of key stakeholders. Seven teams were examined, four from the pilot and three from the roll-out. Research design and data analysis drew on a framework that we have developed in a number of studies which identifies short and the longer term outcomes, antecedents and moderating factors (Simkins, et al, 2009), but extended it by considering the implications of a programme being targeted at teams rather than at individual leaders.

Frame

Ways of understanding the particular challenges of leading and managing in collaborations and partnerships which cross agency and professional boundaries is of increasing interest in the literature. Some approaches focus on different aspects of the challenge. For example, both Anning et al (2006) and Close (2009) argue that leaders and managers have to address a range of structural, political cultural and inter-professional dilemmas in areas such as structure, culture politics, while Armistead et al (2009) suggest that leaders have to work at a number of levels: those of individual leadership, inter-personal and inter-group relationships, and at the more systemic level of structures, processes and protocols. Underlying such approaches, however, are deeper questions concerning the different structural relationships that can provide the context for partnership work. The apparently simple generic idea of the 'multi-agency team' is, in fact, highly problematic: Ovretveit (1993) distinguished between five types of operational teams and the relationships of team members with co-ordinators and/or managers from one or more organisations, while questions arise about how 'teams' relate to communities of practice (Wenger, 2001) and networks (Jackson and Stainsby, 2000). It seems likely that the ways in which partnerships are structured and the formal and informal relationships that

develop as a result will significantly affect both the type of learning that can take place within them and its potential to have a longer term effect on the quality of provision. This paper explores this question.

Research findings

The study found that a number of factors in the programme design contributed to individual learning and team development. However, we also confirmed the value of the broad evaluation framework which we have developed in other studies, suggesting that programme effectiveness depends not just on the quality of provision but also on factors external to the programme, particularly the antecedents of participants and teams, the degree of organisational support which is provided to them during the programme and the degree to which organisational structure and processes provide a context for the learning to be built upon and embedded at operational and strategic levels. Our case study teams differed considerably along these dimensions, leading us to conclude that a generic concern with teams is misplaced and attention needs to be given to broader concepts of multi-professional working, which examine the inter-connectedness of team or network structures at potentially three levels of children's services: a 'core', mainly operational MATD 'team'; a children's services strategic level team or network; and much wider multi-agency networks of professionals. Therefore we need a frame that enables us to better understand the inter-connectedness of teams working at potentially multiple levels, including a focus on learning across levels and relationships of power. Edwards et al (2009) draw on Bernstein's work on the classification and framing of professional categories to examine relationships between the operational and strategic levels of multi-agency teams in children's services. We have, therefore, extended this analysis to our multi-agency teams to consider learning and relationships of power across the three levels.

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