

ARTICLE



Becoming comfortable with chaos: making collaborative multi-agency working work

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ABSTRACT

This article makes a distinct contribution to the understanding of establishing multi-agency working. Using Horwath and Morrison's framework, a collaboration is described in detail, bringing multiple agencies to work with children attending a new special school for those with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs, and with their families. 'Imaginal pictures' of the multi-agency collaboration are outlined, with explanations of conscious and unconscious barriers to integrated working. Lessons are identified for future multi-agency collaborations, in terms of design and vision, membership, resourcing and leadership.

KEYWORDS

Multi-agency working; service design; system leadership; collaboration; commissioning multi-agency services

Introduction

This article highlights some lessons for giving multi-agency collaborations the best chance of success. It is based on the author's experience managing a collaboration in the public sector, including setting up a complex new multi-agency system in a very short time frame. This article identifies the importance of overcoming inevitable obstacles, based on reflections about designing, leading and managing such collaborations. The intention is not to criticise anyone.

The need for multi-agency collaboration for young people with social, emotional, mental health difficulties

'Don't work collaboratively unless you have to' (Huxham and Vangen 2004, 200).

In order to make the best efforts to meet the needs of client groups with complex needs, professionals, organisations and sectors need to work together. However, exactly how that happens, what needs to be in place, how collaborative working is envisaged, commissioned, managed and led, seems to be opaque at best.

Inter-group collaboration is 'where a group of people come to work together because of their membership in other groups or institutions whose tasks overlap' (Roberts 1994b, 191). 'Teams' are set up, professionals from different backgrounds and employers may be co-located, with new referral systems designed and allocation processes in place. Management is often not authorised, organisational aims and drivers are often inconsistent and even conflicting, and accountabilities are often multiple and confusing.

Yet clients' needs remain and committed professionals use their energies and skills to work together to meet those needs as best we can. The aim is to achieve 'collaborative advantage – i.e. outcomes that could not be reached by any of the organisations acting alone' (Huxham and Vangen 2000, 30).

The recommendation from lead researchers against collaborating unless absolutely necessary, quoted above, is striking, even shocking. However, might there be a way of noticing their warning,

and yet trying to do it anyway? And if so, what might be a helpful way of outlining how to give collaborative multi-agency working the best chance of success?

Young people with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) difficulties typically have a range of complex needs. They are often part of families who are struggling to manage with a range of economic, social and psychological needs. Many families have significant needs in relation to finances, housing and unemployment. There are high rates of domestic violence and of mental health and attachment difficulties. Most of these children and young people have difficulties in relationships – with adults, authority figures and with peers. Many have a range of learning difficulties. Many are vulnerable to exploitation – in terms of gang affiliation, criminality, drug abuse and dealing, and sexual exploitation.

Therefore multiple assessments and interventions need to be managed and co-ordinated in order to achieve ‘collaborate advantage’ in terms of outcomes for children and families. From their perspective, it makes most sense to base such support around somewhere familiar. Children (mostly) go to school, and professionals are accessible and familiar when based at school.

Finding my role

An inner city local authority invested in a new specialist SEMH education provision. This included investing in a new school staff team and two new school buildings.

In addition, many other posts were also created, with funding given to a range of employing agencies. These included a number of local authority services (social work, family support, youth work, support for post-school education and training, educational welfare, educational psychology), local NHS Trusts (child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS), speech and language therapy, school nursing, occupational therapy), charities (providing support to parents; providing creative arts therapies) and the police. In total there were 22 posts created, employed by 13 different services, from different sectors – education, health, local authority, police and charities. There was no manager post or role in the design, and no time allocated for management of this new multi-agency resource.

The newly appointed Director of the SEMH education provision (a role akin to ‘Executive Head Teacher’) realised that there was a need for time and resource to manage these new posts in what was termed the ‘multi-agency team’. Having already worked for many years in one part of the pre-existing service, as a CAMHS Clinical Psychologist in a Pupil Referral Unit (Solomon 2011; Solomon and Thomas 2013), I expressed my interest. Consequently, I found myself (Reed 1976) in two new roles simultaneously, both as the new lead for CAMHS in the school system, and also as the ‘Multi-Agency Team Manager’. In one role, I was clearly accountable to the CAMH service, according to my contract of employment with the local NHS CAMHS provider organisation. In the other, multi-agency team manager role, I was informally accountable to the school Director and the school governors. This multi-agency management role was not incorporated into my job description.

A conceptual framework

Multi-agency collaborations are vitally important for meeting the needs of children and young people with complex needs (Horwath and Morrison 2007; Sloper 2004).

Yet they are beset with difficulties including ‘issues regarding lack of ownership amongst senior managers; inflexible organizational structures; conflicting professional ideologies; lack of budget control; communication problems; poor understanding of roles and responsibilities and mistrust amongst professionals’ (Horwath and Morrison 2007, 57).

Horwath and Morrison (2007, 56) identify five levels of multi-agency collaboration.

- (1) Communication: individuals from different disciplines talking together
- (2) Co-operation: low key joint working on a case-by-case basis

- (3) Co-ordination: more formalized joint working, but no sanctions for non-compliance
- (4) Coalition: joint structures sacrificing some autonomy
- (5) Integration: organizations merge to create new joint identity

This framework is very helpful for conceptualising the opportunities and difficulties in the case example outlined in this paper, particularly for identifying the different imaginal pictures of this multi-agency collaboration.

Imaginal pictures of the organisation

Elliott Jaques (1956) introduced the idea of the 'imaginal picture' of the organisation. We all have pictures of existing organisations we know, work in and with – an idea of 'the organisation in the mind' (Armstrong, 2005; Hutton, Bazalgette, and Reed 1997). However, forming an imaginal picture is a vital part of designing and creating a new organisation before it even comes into being. It is a picture of the imagined organisation, 'in the mind's eye', and so is a fundamental basis for designing and creating the new organisation.

My imaginal picture (level '5+')

Given my prior experience as a CAMHS clinician working within a specialist education provision, my 'imaginal picture' involved a highly integrated organisation, with a new multi-agency system working within the school boundary. This would involve each professional, and their employing agency, giving up some degree of autonomy in order to be managed within the school system, according to the tasks identified in the system. Shared working processes, outcomes and accountabilities would need to be created and agreed. Ideally, all professionals would be formally seconded from their employing agencies, and managed within the school system, with some joint 'matrix management' across the school and employing organisations. Budgets would be allocated to the school, where the children and families attended regularly. In terms of Horwath and Morrison's (2007) classification, this imaginal picture was one of full integration (level 5). In terms of my picture of full integration of the different agencies with each other and with the school, this could be characterised as level '5+' integration.

The director's imaginal picture (level 5)

The 'imaginal picture' in the Director's mind seemed similar, with frequent talk of 'secondments', labelling the 'multi-agency team', advertising for a 'multi-agency team manager', and a strong desire to manage the work of the different professionals. We were both committed to joining up the work of colleagues from different agencies as much as possible within the school system. We found ourselves repeating to various audiences the commitment to young people and their families being entitled to support – an 'entitlement model' – rather than being referred elsewhere.

Despite our close alignment, there was a question whether the Director and I had a close enough vision of the educational task and the purpose of the school. I had a belief that education is about preparing young people for adult life, with professionals involved to support them in developing a range of skills and resilience. However, the school seemed to have other priorities alongside, particularly dominated by the requirements of the inspectorate Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), especially concerns about academic standards and progress. The implication was that multi-agency work was viewed, through an 'Ofsted lens', as an 'add-on' to the core school work, rather than an integral part of it. It seemed that Ofsted requirements constituted the most pressing context. Both the Director and I saw the multiple agencies as collaborating with each other at level 5, while the school remained a separate system in the Director's mind.

Beyond these templates were the imaginal pictures of the new collaboration in the minds of a large number of senior managers and commissioners.

Different agencies' imaginal pictures

There were substantial differences in imaginal pictures in the minds of agency managers. This was particularly evident in the extent to which different agencies viewed themselves as 'inside' or 'outside' the new organisation.

Some members may be reluctant participants fearing that the partnership may threaten organizational autonomy (Barton 2002; Hudson et al. 2003). In high-risk areas such as services for vulnerable children, 'concern about legal and public accountability may result in a reluctance to collaborate at the higher levels as managers lose control over staff and service decisions' (Horwath and Morrison 2007, p. 60; Meyers 1993).

The 'political boundary' based on ideas about 'what's in it for us' (Hirschhorn and Gilmore 1992) was problematic. Some agencies were very reluctant to join the collaboration, withholding allocated resources from the newly created system. This meant seeking and invoking commissioners' 'higher authority' to persuade service managers to join the system.

Commissioning, reporting and accountability arrangements remained unaffected in the minds of some senior managers and their practitioners, leading to difficulties in communication, co-ordination and management in relation to multi-agency working within the school.

Attempts to clarify the different imaginal pictures aimed to try to bring unconscious motivations into the open, in order to uncover the different ideas about 'what's in this for us?' At its most basic were conversations about the fundamental purpose of the collaboration.

In terms of Horwath and Morrison (2007) levels of collaboration, some managers envisaged co-ordination at best (level 3), while others imagined simply co-operation, i.e. 'business as usual' (level 2).

Commissioners' imaginal picture (level 3)

The boundaries between separate single agency sub-systems were reinforced by the commissioning arrangements. The design of the system as a whole, and the resulting allocation of funding, made it difficult to think about the whole provision as integrated, rather than a 'school with added-on bits'.

The design seemed to be based on three conscious commissioning decisions. First, what happened elsewhere? There was a need to be seen to be offering services that were provided elsewhere, in order to persuade parents and carers that what was provided locally was at least as good as other specialist provisions. While necessary, an unintended consequence was that the design was based on inputs, or ingredients.

Secondly, a decision had been taken that budgets and employment arrangements were not to be pooled and allocated to the joint school-based service. Rather, budgets and employment were to stay within each separate home agency, without any secondments.

Thirdly, there was no time budgeted or allocated for any authorised management function or role in relation to integrating multi-agency working.

In terms of Horwath and Morrison (2007) classification, it seemed that what had been commissioned was at the level of 'co-ordination – formalized joint working, but no sanctions for non-compliance' (level 3). This was different to the views of other stakeholders, including me, the Director, and other key colleagues. In our minds was the imaginal picture of at least 'coalition – joint structures sacrificing some autonomy' (p. 56) (level 4).

Table 1 summarises the different levels of collaboration envisaged by different stakeholders.

Crucially, at no point was it made explicit among all stakeholders what level of collaboration was being envisaged. So these different expectations and imaginal pictures remained, without the differences being identified, let alone resolved. The lack of clarity about these discrepancies, and scope for subsequent confusion and conflict, was problematic from the outset.

Table 1. Summary table of imaginal pictures of the collaboration.

Level	Description	Whose imaginal picture?
1	Communication: different disciplines talking together	
2	Co-operation: joint working on a case-by-case basis	Some agency managers
3	Co-ordination: formalised joint working	Some agency managers; Commissioners
4	Coalition: joint structures	School staff; some practitioners
5	Integration: agencies merged to create a new organisational identity – the ‘multi-agency team’, separate from the school	School Director; some key people
5+	Integration: agencies and school merged to create one organisational identity	Myself

Attempts to bring my picture to life

Making my role

Collaborations require significant effort to understand all the different perspectives. ‘When people from different organisations work together for the first time, a great deal of effort generally has to be invested by all concerned into understanding the world as seen by the other participants’ (Huxham and Vangen 2000, 29).

For my new role to have meaning, a collaborative system needed to be created, on the basis of consensus and shared goals. Making a role (Reed 1976) as ‘multi-agency team manager’ could only be done collaboratively with others. I had to find out a great deal about a large number of organisations, their priorities and pressures, and more concrete aspects like recruitment procedures and line management arrangements. One-to-one confidential meetings with multi-agency colleagues, once appointed, were very important, to align values and to help people to feel more ‘belonging’ to the system. Similarly, individual meetings with their service managers were also important, again in aligning values, understanding different drivers, monitoring requirements, beginning to articulate shared goals and anticipating issues. Three-way meetings to review progress, contain anxieties and ensure good, ongoing communication were also vital, particularly as I was not a line manager for the vast majority of colleagues in the ‘multi-agency team’.

Managing overlapping tasks and developing joint working

Boundaries delimit task systems. So a new, shared task requires a new boundary around all those involved (Roberts 1994a). There are different kinds of boundaries that need managing, in terms of task, role, authority, accountability and budgets, to name but a few.

There was a need from the outset to clarify overlapping task and role boundaries, without making assumptions about ‘who does what?’ (Hirschhorn and Gilmore 1992). In a matrix system ‘each person has a specialized task together with overlapping competence with other members’ (Herbst 1993, 287).

Developing ways of working together involved multiple dialogues. Conversations with all service managers involved shaping the design and priorities for the roles being proposed, trying to clarify commissioning arrangements, negotiating accountabilities and matrix management arrangements, recruitment procedures and associated responsibilities.

Conversations with role holders once they were appointed then involved ways of working, priorities for their roles, support, supervision, recording and outcome monitoring. ‘Team’ discussions elaborated on these and other questions, so that shared ways of working together could be agreed, reviewed and jointly owned by as many people as possible. Colleagues joined the new system with allegiances to their home agencies, embodied in pre-existing timetables and meeting schedules. Negotiation, explanation and persuasion were required to encourage colleagues, with

their home agency managers' approval, to begin to attend and participate in new structures within the school setting. Not all colleagues made such a transition.

More seamless, entitlement-based, joined up ways of working required a change in mind-set for many. It meant that everyone needed to work differently to achieve the added value for the users. Everyone in the 'multi-agency team' had to understand that, while they were independent, with their own external service line manager and accountabilities, they were also a part of systems within the school, and had responsibilities and accountabilities to that school system, whether to the Director, Head Teachers or Multi-Agency Team Manager (me). Their specialist roles were valued, but were part of a 'coalitioned' (level 4) or 'on the way to becoming integrated' (level 5 or 5+) system.

There were clear benefits of developing a shared vision of multi-agency working. There was much evidence of the benefits of the emerging system, in terms of developing effective multi-agency practice and 'added value' for both practitioners and users. In particular, an integrated process of assessment was established for students and families new to the school, involving both a school-based induction meeting and a subsequent discussion with the whole family, aimed to inform initial assessments, to identify priorities for new pupils and their parents/carers, and to foster a sense of belonging as early as possible. Also regular and frequent 'multi-agency review meetings' played an important part in co-ordinating a range of assessments and interventions, in a forum for thinking together and making decisions for care plans, that were effectively shared across school and multi-agency staff.

Adaptive leadership in an emergent system

Challenges that require technical leadership are new versions of old or familiar problems – a sense of 'we've been here before, we can adapt what we have done previously in order to apply familiar solutions to address this current question'. In contrast, adaptive leadership is needed when we don't even know the questions that need addressing (Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky 2009). We need to be open to unfamiliar challenges as they emerge, having the capacity to adapt to new situations without previous examples or experience to fall back on. For me, taking up two new roles simultaneously in emerging contexts made me question my capacity for the adaptive leadership required.

While there was limited formal managerial authority from 'above', I did seem to be earning authorisation from 'around' and 'below'. Colleagues around me – the Director, school leaders, multi-agency colleagues, their line managers and commissioners – all seemed to respect me and my work, and questions were never raised about my competence or suitability for what I was doing. Indeed, external feedback was positive about how multi-agency working, and the school system as a whole, was progressing.

Having felt de-authorised initially I gradually became more able to authorise myself from 'within' (Obholzer 1994). Over time I found myself increasingly acting as if fully authorised, taking up the role of 'manager' on behalf of the school system, negotiating with external service managers and commissioners with the aim of developing a shared purpose and vision. In the words of a popular global brand, I found the authority from within to 'just do it'.

Scharmer (2009) writes that effective leadership involves observing and reflecting before acting. If familiar solutions are attempted to resolve new, unfamiliar challenges, then the result will be, among others, frustration. Rather, he encourages the use of 'deep seeing, or sensing', keeping an open mind to new experiences and ideas, 'letting come' as well as 'letting go' and being more open to a sense of future possibility.

In terms of leadership in the specific context of inter-agency collaboration, some authors have identified the importance of having a 'collaborative champion' (Hallett and Birchall 1992; Hudson et al. 2003). 'These are committed, energized individuals who have high levels of credibility, influence, charisma and integrity, acknowledged both internally and externally by other agencies. They possess high quality interpersonal and networking skills, which enable them to negotiate the

interfaces, ambiguities, tensions and turf issues, which exist between and within agencies.' (Horwath and Morrison 2007, 61–62).

Creating a facilitating culture

At the very beginning of life, Donald Winnicott (1945) suggests, the infant is in a state of 'primary unintegration', consisting of unconnected feelings and impressions. The natural 'tendency to integrate' is made possible by the primary carer providing a 'facilitating environment', including repeated physical and psychological holding.

Esther Bick (1968) wrote about the containing nature of skin, that it holds together unintegrated parts, like a sack of potatoes. The primary carer is like the emotional skin, holding the baby together.

In an organisation the 'skin' is the ethos or culture, as a shared state of mind of its members. The challenge to create and maintain a facilitating school culture in SEMH settings is significant, providing a shared context in which the impulse to react to provocation, powerful counter-transference and projective identification (Halton 1994) can be contained and managed. The challenge to maintain positive feelings is ongoing, not a static or one-off act. It requires constant renewing, and depends on the quality of leadership and management, and on sustaining psychological thinking, through ongoing consultancy, supervision and joint thinking together (Solomon and Thomas 2013; Winnicott 1987).

There is also an ongoing dynamic of 'pulling apart'. Staff teams are subject to inevitable 'splitting' (Halton 1994) on a daily basis. This is an ongoing process, which needs constant and repeated containment (just as a primary carer needs to offer a baby constant containment).

Bringing sub-systems together, with school staff and other agencies' staff meeting and thinking together, was both a challenge and a necessity to sustain such thinking in very challenging environments. The challenge was to provide a 'good enough facilitating culture' for a new-born organisational system that had been newly created in an unintegrated form.

Conscious and unconscious resistance to integration

'Major impediments to inter-professional collaboration originate in the unconscious needs of practitioners to use the structures of their agencies and professional groups in their struggle to manage task-related anxiety' (Woodhouse and Pengelly 1991, 228). As anxiety increases when working with vulnerable children, so do both the wish/need to collaborate, but also the defences against collaboration (Horwath and Morrison 2007, 60).

Evidence of resistance to integration included: a lack of explicitly articulated shared goals, a lack of clear authorisation, unclear membership, confusion about territorial boundaries and resistance to shared evaluation.

A lack of shared goals

'Differences between agencies as to what "meta-goals" (i.e. the overarching aims of the collaboration) should be can lead to dilution resulting in loss of partnership direction and commitment' (Horwath and Morrison 2007, 62).

Sinek (2009) writes about 'starting with why', motivating people by inspiring them to act. Only when the 'why' is clear can meaningful relationships develop. This implies the essential importance of sharing a purpose, cause, belief and attitude. Out of that, ideas about the 'how' can be developed together.

Life depends on continuity and in most significant transitions, acceptance and adjustment are more difficult than anticipated. The public face of change is growth and development, while private meanings of change involve resistance, not acceptance. Feelings can include incompetence and conflict, loss, grief and bereavement (Marris 1974).

In a new or emergent system, it is helpful to try to open up conversations about fundamental questions such as ‘what are we jointly here to do?’, ‘what outcome is required?’, and ‘what difference should we be making?’

To my knowledge, at no time were shared goals, or the ‘why’, ever discussed, let alone agreed. In establishing a school, being accountable to governors and Ofsted, it was as if such questions had already been asked, answered, understood and agreed to. In terms of integration, the higher the level of collaboration the greater the change for each participating agency; the lower the collaboration level, the less change is needed.

Without the opportunities for explicitly sharing different ‘imaginal pictures’, these differences persisted implicitly. The Director and Head Teachers seemed to have a picture of embedded professionals ‘seconded’ from home agencies into the school system, and yet there were no such secondment arrangements. In contrast, my own CAMHS manager had a picture of a system of mental health provision that was offered to the school as one of many locations. Other home agency managers had similar views from outside the school system. It seemed that there were assumptions that the work needed for integration had already been done.

A lack of clear authorisation

‘Where task-systems have overlapping boundaries, and their members are part of two management systems, the question of who is managing what – where authority is located – can become critical. Many collaborative enterprises founder because this question is not adequately addressed.’ (Roberts 1994b, 194).

The Sainsbury Centre (2000) highlights the need for clear policies and lines of accountability within inter-agency partnerships.

Under continual uncertainty about the actual ownership of authority, ‘any individual’s authority must be continuously negotiated in relation to the current task’ (Cooper and Dartington 2004, 146). In the absence of clarity regarding authority and accountability, it often felt that the task was all that was left to guide and empower.

Managing in uncertain, networked complex systems poses new challenges. ‘Where once role, task, and authority in the context of a bounded system were the guarantors of the possibility of organizational sanity, the employee or manager now struts naked in the open-plan, hot-desking office of inter-organizational vulnerability’ (Cooper and Dartington 2004, 148).

If one has an office, that is (see territory section below).

Different accountabilities

‘If members are unclear about the structures of the collaboration, they cannot be clear where the accountabilities lie’ (Huxham and Vangen 2000, 800).

In one meeting, one Head Teacher colleague said that ‘we’re not accountable to commissioners’. While upset by this remark, I also realised that the identity boundary – ‘who is, and isn’t, “us?”’ – was being drawn tightly around the school system that is accountable to governors and Ofsted, excluding other staff. While schools are accountable to their governors, other agencies are accountable to their commissioners. There were multiple lines of accountability, each with different targets and reward systems.

Integration comes with a threat to one’s identity as a professional from a particular discipline employed in a particular sector. Such ‘fear of homogenisation’ in group settings (Turquet 1974, 143) without distinctions or differentiations between members of group enterprises, kept some practitioners, agencies and their systems of commissioning and accountability separate and apart. Professionals and agencies were caught between belonging to the collaboration, with threats to their vocational identity, or keeping their identity at the expense of isolation and separateness.

The unconscious investment in having blurred authority and accountability is to avoid blame for any 'failures' in relation to any child or family, or systemic failures.

Unclear membership was one consequence of the pulling apart effect of different accountabilities.

Unclear membership

'Memberships of collaborations are ambiguous, complex and dynamic ... This is an inevitable consequence of the nature of collaboration' (Huxham and Vangen 2000, 26).

Every member of a group is likely to be also a member of other groups. 'It becomes crucial, both for the individual and for the group, to manage this dual membership ... When a new collaborative group first comes together, its members are likely to identify themselves predominantly in terms of their home-agencies. This may well make it very difficult for the collaborative group to work effectively (Roberts 1994b, 192).

The membership, and sense of belonging, of and in the 'multi-agency team', was a constant question. For each professional, did they feel they belonged to their employing home agency, or to the school system? And if both, then to what extent, and which was more important or salient? There were different degrees of belonging and committing.

Different meanings of the words 'we' and 'us' arose in different contexts. Did 'we' refer to the school-based staff team, the multi-agency team, the school system as a whole, and/or the wider set of services across the local authority and the area as a whole?

Confusion about territorial boundaries

'Boundaries, both physical and social, emphasize difference with resulting competition and status hierarchies. Boundaries support personal, group, or national identity through a definition of belonging which includes who is in and who is out ... The design process, the appropriation and redefinition of space, is particularly prone to the covert and the irrational' (Colman 1975, p321).

Design of the new school service was represented in the physical design of the new school buildings. Initially, there was no allocated space within the new school buildings for multi-agency staff. This was corrected immediately when I drew attention to this, but unconsciously this represented the difficulty of incorporating and integrating the full range of services, professionals and agencies in the complex new system.

A decision was made to have a separate 'multi-agency room' in each school building. The split between school staff and non-school staff was embodied in, and reinforced by, this decision. The space eventually allocated to multi-agency staff was, in both schools, the room furthest away from the centre of the school. This spatial split seemed to reflect the service design and the commissioning split between the school system and the multi-agency system.

'Internal conflicts are externalized and projected onto the new building' (Colman 1975, 324).

Across the different agencies, there were different commitments to being based 'on site'. In terms of some agencies resisting more full membership of the multi-agency 'team', this may also have been the result of a wish to stay less 'contaminated' by the school system and the intrinsic challenges within it. It may therefore have represented a wish for separation, mirroring the dynamics of exclusion (Solomon 2009) in the professional system, keeping a distance between the home agency and the excluded students, their families, and the 'exclusion system' of which they were a part. Isolation and separation served as a defence against the fear of contamination.

Resistance to shared evaluation

Integrated working will only occur when agencies share collective responsibility for both defining the nature of, and achieving shared outcomes (Devaney 2004; Hogan and Murphy 2002; Horwath and Morrison 2007; Miller and McNicholl 2003).

Outcomes for young people with complex needs are not likely to be the result of the work of any single professional or agency. However, outcome monitoring and evaluation was organised by each home agency separately. Each was required to report on their own outcome measures to their own commissioners (or governors). Consequently setting up a shared evaluation system pitted individual goodwill, motivation, negotiation and shared purpose against pre-established single agency arrangements.

Eventually some progress was made, finding common ground across some of the agencies, and relying on people's goodwill to share and adapt ways of evaluating. Inevitably, some duplication of recording and reporting remained and could not be avoided altogether.

Alongside elements embedded in the design, there seemed to be other dynamic factors in making shared evaluation difficult. One explanation was that there was a danger that the measure would reveal that there was no impact of everyone's work. This is a common cause of ambivalence – or hatred – regarding outcome measures generally, but particularly when working with client groups with complex needs. However, the hatred and unintegration may also have been a defence against rivalry and competition. There may have been a risk of some services or possibly individual professionals being seen as more effective than others. Such dissonance would create rivalry.

Anxiety relating to being judged increases with collaboration. On the one hand, participants become more visible to each other, increasing the fear of being seen as contributing less, or having less impact, than others. On the other hand, 'collaborative advantage' cannot be apportioned to any particular collaborator, making it difficult to prove one's own particular value. The problem with working together to achieve 'collaborative advantage' for service users is the lack of credit attributable to individual collaborators.

Learning, progress and leadership

With some agencies, explicit discussion about the purpose and vision for more integrated working helped to shift and overcome previously held assumptions. With others, there was a greater understanding of commissioning arrangements, budgetary decisions, priorities and anxieties as a result of such discussions. In all cases, such discussions helped to develop closer working.

Alongside these attempts at more strategic alignment, many people 'on the front line' worked creatively day to day to establish key systems and structures, including the co-ordination of the pathways for case management (Ovretveit 1996).

Senge (1990) states that so-called 'learning organisations' are 'organisations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire' (p. 3). Senge argues for the importance of 'the capacity to hold a shared picture of the future we seek to create' and that 'the discipline of team learning starts with "dialogue" – thinking together' (pp. 9–10).

While bringing people together within and outside the system was an ongoing endeavour, it was separate from the decisions that had been made long before about the design of the system. The hope was that feedback to designers would be heard, so that 'thinking together' could generate an amended design in due course that would be better aligned to the task.

According to the King's Fund (2015), effective system leaders in the public sector 'have learnt how to work across organisational boundaries through networks that bring together services around the needs of populations and people who use these services ... system leaders succeed by "being comfortable with chaos"' (p. 4).

In this example the need for change from the old configuration of separate educational provisions was agreed by everyone involved. However, an articulated, shared vision of what a more integrated new provision might look like was less clear. Creating shared meaning, and especially creating the time for such a process to begin, seemed not possible in the circumstances. However, on reflection, I wondered if the limits and constraints on time may have been used defensively.

Reflections and implications

Collaborations have a better chance of success if their design begins with the desired outcomes for the client group. This must be the key feature of the imaginal picture in the minds of those responsible for the design of the system. Financial, employment and territorial clarity are then more likely to follow. Once designed, those designated to lead and manage collaborations need to contain conflicts and anxieties, in terms of authority, task, political and identity boundaries (Hirschhorn and Gilmore 1992).

In particular there needs to be awareness of conscious and unconscious resistance to collaborative working. These include anxieties regarding competition, contamination, marginalisation, exclusion and control, and consequent defences include splitting and fragmentation at the commissioning level under the guise of retaining control of budgets and managerial authority, and the potential for a design that mirrors the fragmented state of mind of vulnerable client groups resulting in a developmentally unintegrated system.

Unconscious factors in design have specific implications at four levels of the system – the vision of those responsible for designing the system, the identity of those involved, implications for funding and for leadership capacities for those within the system.

Design and vision

Starting with ‘why’ (Sinek 2009) is essential at the design phase of any collaboration. Jaques (1956) writes about levels of complexity in organisations, with increasing levels of complexity accompanied by increasing levels of discretion. The design of a system is at the highest level of discretion.

Those with the highest level of discretion need to start with the imaginal picture and a vision of the collaboration, its purpose and reason for existence, and consequently the level of integration envisaged. This picture needs to be shared as clearly as possible, so that financial and leadership implications follow.

Observably, these considerations would result in greater clarity about the membership of a multi-agency collaboration, and more coherent evaluation systems jointly set up in service of the collaborative task.

For effective integrated working, financial budgets need to be pooled, with authorised roles responsible for their use in service of the agreed shared task. Clear employment, secondment, role relationship and accountability arrangements need to be authorised, in a way that makes sense to all the collaborators whom it is envisaged need to be involved. The level of collaboration, whether coalition or full integration (level 4 or 5), needs to be made explicit.

Membership

There is a need to identify ‘who does what?’ as clearly as possible, acknowledging that there will be overlaps. It is important to identify as early as possible what everyone involved is expected to contribute that is new and different from their traditional, single agency role.

Co-location is necessary but not sufficient for effective collaborative working. The physical location of staff both represents and heavily influences the nature of the ‘team’ and of the collaboration generally. When territorial disputes arise, they need to be made conscious so that boundary relationships can be (re)defined.

In terms of employment arrangements, ‘partnership, collaboration, outsourcing, secondment, are all contemporary reflections of the trend towards ‘networked’ organisational functioning’ (Cooper and Dartington 2004, 128). Arrangements need to be articulated and shared explicitly, and be specifically designed to be in service of the agreed shared goals of the collaboration.

In any collaboration, there needs to be some degree of relinquishing autonomy in order to work to a shared purpose that both the individual and the agency are committed to and care about. There is a trade-off, sacrificing some individual and agency autonomy, in return for a shared commitment.

Resourcing

'Achieving collaborative advantage – i.e. outcomes that could not be reached by any of the organisations acting alone – requires major resource investment ... and nurturing indefinitely ... An experienced and competent collaboration manager, facilitator or convenor is an essential asset, but cannot be expected to deliver for the collaboration without the appropriate level of resource and support' (Huxham and Vangen 2000, 30).

Financial resources must be allocated for 'an experienced and competent collaboration manager', who must be clearly authorised and be accountable for their work as stipulated in a clear job description. It is not enough to provide resources for the ingredient parts of a collaborative system. There need to be resources available for an integrating managerial role to make joint working work. Again, this is vital to counter the inevitable conscious and unconscious motivations working to resist collaboration.

Leadership

'Attention to nurturing relationships and building trusted networks becomes imperative' (Horwath and Morrison 2007, 66).

A 'collaboration manager' needs to act as if formally authorised, to contain the inevitable 'conflicts and anxieties that disrupt productive work' (Hirschhorn and Gilmore 1992, 112). Often it can be hard to see progress over time in an emergent system. It is important to have and retain realistic ideas about just how much time new and complicated systems can take to establish.

Inevitably there is a lack of clarity in new, young, complex systems. Working with emergence and the inevitable adaptive challenges can be a struggle. Over time, I became more interested in the design of the system.

Successful collaborations need adaptive and nurturing leadership, working with emergence over a long time period. All involved need to feel that there is a good enough 'facilitative environment' (Winnicott 1945) that promotes integration. Above all, such leadership is needed at all levels of the system, from designers, budget holding stakeholders 'at the centre', as well as managers and staff 'on the front line'. When visions and values are aligned, then multi-agency collaborations stand the best chance of success in meeting the complex needs of their clients.

Conclusion

Collaborations can achieve a great deal through negotiation, developing joint working practices and incremental progress made by practitioners working directly with service users. However, flaws at the design stage will make it extremely difficult for those working in the system to achieve 'collaborative advantage' for service users. Design and vision are key, and require inter-sector input in order to co-create an explicitly shared 'imaginal picture' of the type of collaboration that will best meet the complex needs of service users, informed by awareness of resistance to collaboration. This needs to be shared at a sufficiently senior, strategic level across sectors and agencies in order to authorise fundamental changes in working practices to promote collaboration. Once this is achieved, authorisation for a managerial and leadership role is crucial to 'champion' the collaboration.

These conditions will give multi-agency collaborations the best chance of success.

Acknowledgments

I am very grateful to William Halton and Vega Zagier Roberts for their thoughts and comments on an earlier draft. I am also very grateful to Kate Bayley, Sarah Brown, Fiona Henderson, Jeanette Lowe, Andy Wiener and Bernadette Wren for their feedback.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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