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Partnerships: a common sense approach to inclusion?[1]

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There is an increasing emphasis on inter-agency, inter-professional, multi-agency and multi-professional partnerships as a means of nurturing social inclusion. Both compulsory and post-compulsory education are central pillars in the UK's 'battle' against exclusion. Existing professional and service divisions are seen as creating barriers: a source of further exclusion for the disenfranchised. 'Joined-up solutions' mean educators from higher, further and community education are called upon to work with welfare agencies, regeneration projects and voluntary organisations. The proliferating inter-agency, inter-professional collaborative approaches have gained the status of being regarded as the common sense approach; the joined-up solution to the joined-up problem. Such discourse has popular appeal and has achieved hegemonic status, going largely unchallenged, widely welcomed and subjected to scant unbiased analysis. Specialised, compartmentalised professions were once 'common sense' but now staff are required to work together to ensure co-ordination, avoid duplication, share knowledge and information and to create new approaches through drawing creatively on a widened range of techniques. The merit of this approach tends to be assumed: Richards and Horder note that 'few voices are heard arguing against collaboration' (Richards and Horder 1999: 45) although Thompson warns that 'partnership' has become a 'buzz-word' and thus 'runs the risk of being dismissed as a fad or fashion, and its significance as a practice principle lost in the process' (Thompson 1998: 212). Little research has been conducted into the aspects of inter-agency work which are conducive to success or otherwise. However, people currently involved in partnerships are interested in identifying the elements which contribute to success in achieving the identified aims in order to transfer the learning. Whether, in the longer term, partnerships will be established as the new orthodoxy or eclipsed by some new trend, its current ascendancy calls out for further academic interrogation.

Q: Are there many partnerships?

A: Yes, and the number appears to be growing.

Local authorities are required to produce a plethora of interagency plans, including Lifelong Learning, Children's Services and Early Years and Childcare Development. The Social Exclusion Unit's recent report 'Bridging the Gap' identified the need to rationalise and reorganise the 'current fragmented patterns of professions and services' with responsibilities for 16-18 year olds not in education, employment or training. Arguably reacting to the potential for duplication inherent in the plans, the government announced its intention to create 'a single new advice and support service, in charge of trying to steer young people aged between 13 and 19 through the system'. Although 'a universal service' is envisaged, it will 'give priority to those most at risk of underachievement and disaffection' (SEU 1999: Section 1.21). This is expanded in the potentially far-reaching Connexions strategy which includes establishing the 'new profession of Personal Adviser' (DfEE 2000a: 45). The 'new profession' will include existing youth workers, careers officers, college lecturers, school teachers and other staff working within the social professions who will receive training additional to their original vocational qualifications in order to put the policies into practice. Uniquely, this strategy also moves beyond the establishment of inter-disciplinary partnerships and manipulates professional genes to generate a new hybrid. The impact of the creation of a 'new profession' presents potentially interesting research material.

Since New Labour became the UK's government, there has been a massive growth in partnerships as professional collaborations bringing together practitioners from different traditions and professional cultures. Community organisations tend to be conspicuous in their absence, having been 'consulted', often implicitly, during the consultation phases of policy formulation. For example, at national level, the proposals for Connexions contained in 'Bridging the Gap' 'solicited more than 380 written responses from practitioners and others; and over 600 people attended consultation events' (DfEE

2000b: 19). An impressive response is implied but the initiative will affect *all* young people, their parents / carers and people who work with them: a substantial part of the UK's population. The implementation of the policy is now the responsibility of professionals: communities have been 'consulted'.

Existing research tends to focus on those pre-1997 partnerships, often engaged in urban regeneration with an economic focus, which brought together the public and private sectors, community and voluntary organisations. The research often interrogates the apparent discourse of empowerment. Writing in the dying days of the Conservative government, Collins and Lister analysed tenants' experience of partnership where the rhetoric of 'participation', 'local control' and 'local people taking control back from bureaucrats and having a say in building a better future' masked the reality of 'securing the compliance of community organisations with an externally-imposed agenda' (Collins and Lister 1997: 38): partnerships to validate decisions. Questions concerning the forms of power inherent in the relationship and the pathologising nature of area-based approaches to tackling issues around deprivation and poverty are raised by commentators such as Player. Drawing on Gramsci, he argues that, 'one of the domestic instruments for securing consent is through the 'moral and intellectual suasion' of Partnership' (Player 1996: 49). The individuals and communities involved develop knowledge, skills and confidence: Collins and Lister, using Freire to help to explain the processes which took place, note how community activists learned about the nature of oppression and resistance (Collins and Lister 1997) but the economic transformation may be less apparent.

Q: Can partnerships work?

A: That's a matter of opinion.

It could be suggested that the increasing emphasis on inter-agency, inter-professional approaches is despite, rather than because of, documented experience. Parsons observes,

Numerous acts and official guidance documents over the years have urged collaboration between services. The constant need for reiteration reflects enduring concerns arising from experience, and much of the research conducted into inter-agency working, showing the apparent failure of such collaboration to work out in practice (Parsons 1999:144).

Kendrick offers one example of such research, focussing on social workers' and schoolteachers' participation in inter-agency initiatives in Scotland. He suggests initial training for each fosters negative stereotyping of the others' profession. Whilst 'a high level or knowledge and skills' is required, the qualifying training for each provides 'limited opportunities to learn about the work of others' and possibly serves to 'reinforce mutual suspicion' (Kendrick 1995:137). This lack of knowledge and resultant tendency to engage in negative stereotyping has an impact on practitioners' capacity to co-operate effectively in practice. Professional imperialism results: professionals see their techniques as more effective, seek to spread their methods and quote research in support. Furthermore, varying structures within which the different potential partners are located also have an impact: the participating agencies and staff do not fit together comfortably.

Agencies and professionals' training are not the only roots of difficulty. Acknowledging that their findings are at odds with most research, which locates difficulties at structural level, Richards and Horder identify the personal commitment of participants as being of paramount significance in ensuring the success of partnerships. For them, emphasis on 'personal feelings, views and attitudes' matters more than 'professional and agency structures'. They analyse significant factors under four headings: the 'local champion' (the charismatic enthusiast whose commitment proves infectious), 'critical mass' (sufficient enthusiastic participants), sufficient time and mutual trust and 'liking' (Richards and Horder 1999:455). Similarly, Morgan and Hughes suggest that the formation of 'trusting relationships' is the key element in successful partnerships. They cite a New Start scheme where the Principal Youth Officer and Chief Executive were 'good friends' who encouraged socialising between their staff teams (Morgan and Hughes 1999: 7). These findings are interesting but potentially unsatisfactory for managers wanting to build successful partnerships rather than establish dating bureaux. Partnerships based on mutual warmth lack the potential for sustainability. Sustainability is vital since post-holders change. This points towards the need to identify structural approaches.

Q: What do partners say?

A: It's good to be friends.

Earlier this year, as an aspect of the commissioned evaluation of a New Start project, I undertook focussed interviews with members of the partnership, staff and young people. Partnerships were also the subject of in-class discussion during a youth and community work professional qualification course. The cohort comprised part-time in-service students and full-time students on placement with a wide range of agencies. The New Start partners were positive about both their involvement and the scheme itself. In comparison, the students produced anecdotal accounts of predominantly unsatisfactory experiences and observations. Although analysis of the New Start data has yet to be completed, themes are emerging. Data appear to reflect Richards and Horder's emphasis on the importance of inter-personal relationships rather than structural elements. Success tends to be attributed primarily to the commitment and inter-personal skills of the individuals involved, together with willingness to share information openly. Some interviewees suggested that their managers' choice of representatives for partnerships was important in ensuring success. Reflecting the findings of Richards and Horder, it was suggested that there were members of staff who were more, or less, likely to provide the enthusiasm, commitment and level of inter-personal skills required. This places managers in the position of being able to encourage the success or failure of partnerships through selection of participants and highlights their own levels of commitment to the process. 'Liking' and 'being good friends' seems to matter.

New Start partners mentioned the 'shared ethos' of their partnership as contributing to their success. This proved difficult to explore verbally and tended to be 'felt', reflecting Player's comment that the term 'partnership' tends to evoke 'uncritical feelings of warmth and belonging'(Player 1996: 47). In comparison, the students recounted stories of partnerships where participants' very different professional values and understandings generated discord. Considering the gulf between the New Start data and students' accounts suggested a model for analysing partnerships which could provide scope to explore further the 'recipe' for success: a transferable recipe which does not rely on a charismatic participant, personal friendships and the quality of the partners' inter-personal relationships .

Q: Is there a model for success?

A: The 'connected partnership' has potential.

In any inter-professional partnership there are several variables. These include the staff involved, their professional backgrounds, the management and culture of their organisation, the methods and activities which the project employs and the outcomes sought. Each agency has its own aims and objectives, agenda, ethos, organisational culture, values, knowledge and skills which underpin the nature of its commitment and involvement. Different combinations of variables give rise to different identifiable models. The client-as-object, target-focussed 'disconnected partnership' and the holistic, needs-led 'connected' client-centred partnership are considered here in the context of projects / practical, operational level work rather than at the strategic level of policy formulation. These models draw on elements additional to the inter-personal skills of those involved.

i)   Disconnected partnerships

Disconnected partnerships involve agreement between partners on the nature of the work but difference in the emphasis which each puts on the particular aims, objectives and outcomes sought. This model brings together professionals for activities which have the capacity to meet each of their differing requirements. These may have been collaboratively generated and unanimously agreed, but their significance, and even the understanding of them, differs between partners. Kendrick looks at a partnership, the development of which was

punctuated by different perspectives and expectations, so that there has not always been total consensus on the direction it was to take… The roles of the principal agencies involved in the strategy are different in relation to the [different] aspects and this has resulted in differing levels of commitment to different aspects of the strategy (Kendrick 1995: 142).

There may also be difference in the interpretations of the reasons underpinning various activities. The partnership involved in a project, such as New Start, aiming to reach young people not in education, employment or training could involve youth workers, careers officers, FE college staff, youth offending

team staff, police and workers from voluntary organisations. The partners' individual and organisational interpretations of the thinking behind the work may be expressed in similar phrases but build on different underpinning understandings of the purposes enshrined in their own targets, from the reduction in teenage pregnancy or youth offending to participation in education. In such an instance, partners all see the initiative as having the potential to meet their own priority outcomes. However, the outcomes they emphasise differ. They are not necessarily contradictory but may involve concentrating on one outcome at the expense of others. Indeed, the partners may be competing to achieve their prioritised outcomes. The 'disconnected' partnership may foster a project which meets the aims of each of the partners. However, the partnership primarily will be serving the needs of the partners. The clientele of the project become the raw material contributing to performance targets: objects rather than subjects. The varying emphases result in particular significance being accorded to different pieces of information and to different outcomes to the extent that success is measured in differing ways. In terms of providing agencies with positive outcomes for their designated targets, some disconnected partnerships may well be held to have succeeded by partner agencies, especially where measured outcomes are primarily quantitative. The 'objects' may also identify individual successes, depending on their own personal needs and aspirations.

In addition to operational level, aspects of the disconnected partnership are located at the interface between the structures and philosophies of the partners' professions. This results in variance in the identification of the precise nature of the issue(s) the partnership's work is intended to address. The varying epistemological approaches on which the different professions are constructed are rooted in the different interpretations or ontological perceptions of 'reality' and reinforced through the training and education provided for each professional area. Different professions emphasise formal and informal education, group and personal development, welfare or control and their characteristic techniques reflect these interpretations of appropriate responses to situations and issues. Responses are constructed on differently formulated discourses of power, informed by understandings of 'empowerment', 'involvement', 'consent' and, inevitably, 'inclusion'. Partners may lack the opportunity to engage in such fundamental debates: the pragmatic demands of the work take priority.

ii)   Connected partnerships

The alternative, 'client-centred' partnership prioritises outcomes which focus on the project participants themselves, as opposed to the partners. This places the individuals, groups and communities themselves in the 'subject' position. For example, the primary aims for the partnership of a project involving meeting the needs of young people not in education, training or employment would be the young people. The nature of the needs, the resultant aims, objectives and outcomes identified focus on the participants and are identified by the participants, employing the skills of the professionals to draw them out rather than being framed primarily in terms of the outcomes sought by participant agencies. The professionals contribute from their diverse perspectives, drawing on their different ways of working to meet the same outcomes. In the first instance, outcomes are measured in terms of the needs identified by the young people and the outcomes they have achieved. Secondary outcomes are likely to meet the range of priorities identified by members of the partnership: where young people have grown in self-confidence, engaged in a range of activities and moved away from hitherto chaotic lifestyles, they will be more likely to be able to secure and sustain education, training or employment, less likely to become involved in criminal activity and more likely to be in a position to engage in a healthier lifestyle. If the young people are paramount, sharing information becomes the partnership's norm in order to ensure that the primary outcome is achieved.

Within a partnership where the subjects themselves are the primary focus, partners tend to frame their explanations of the success in terms of their fellow partners' interpersonal skills and the fact that they 'worked well together'. However, for organisations seeking to replicate the approach, consideration of underlying factors and pointers for devising appropriate training are appropriate. The 'connected' or client-centred approach offers potential within a specific, professionally formulated paradigm.

Q: What do we take for granted?

A: It's common sense.

Unpicking the phrase 'shared ethos' and comments like 'we worked well together' provides further material for consideration. The holistic approach to partnership can be fostered by participants' ability to 'name' their value base and the philosophical approaches underpinning their profession and to acknowledge the value of alternatives. The practical nature of many forms of training and the emphasis on competencies at the expense of competence has restricted the opportunity for aspiring

professionals to develop understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of their own approaches and consequently their capacity to acknowledge different ontological perceptions. Whilst theorists are constructing bases for the social professions, potential practitioners are pointed towards practical aspects of the work. Good interpersonal skills and 'liking' may assist individuals in transcending this but the role of ontological and epistemological knowledge are of unexplored, hence unexploited, significance in securing successful interprofessional partnerships.

For experienced professionals, whose internalised reflective practice has become intuitive, collaboration highlights the 'taken for granted'; 'the way in which members of a particular cultural group become so immersed in its patterns, assumptions and values that they do not even notice they are there'(Thompson 1998:15)]. In the context of partnerships, 'cultural group' may be identified as professional cultural grouping. Thompson explains how intuitive practice has positive and negative aspects. Positively, 'it contributes to 'ontological security', a sense of rootedness and psychological integration – an important element of mental well-being'(Thompson 1998:15). Ontological security involves knowing, instinctively, the basic frameworks of one's societal, professional and cultural context. However, negatively, it presents potential for prejudices as it 'refers to the tendency to see the world from within the narrow confines of one culture, to project one set of norms and values on to other groups of people' (Thompson 1998:16). This can be translated into professionalised forms of relativism and the belief that one is inherently more valuable, significant or likely to succeed. The projection of norms and values involves the use of one's own frameworks. This leads to mis-comprehension or failure to comprehend other professional paradigms. Thus excessive ontological security, taken to its extreme, produces professional, social and cultural myopia and reinforces mutual suspicions: professional imperialism. Thompson draws a continuum, stretching from 'excessive reliance on security, producing defensiveness and rigidity' to 'insufficient security, producing anxiety and low levels of coping skills' with a central, balanced point: 'a "healthy" balance of ontological security, neither too rigid nor too insecure' (Thompson 1998:32). Ontological security remains 'taken for granted' but, for people in social professions, an awareness of the constituent parts of their security forms an aspect of reflexivity. Collaborating with other professionals presents the opportunity for reflexivity: confronted by new perspectives, elements of the practitioner's own 'taken for granted' practice are highlighted and opened for interrogation. The 'naming' of the constituent aspects of one's professional ontology provides a step towards ontological awareness.

Investigating the relevance and effect of partnership approaches is emphasised when the professional is confronted by new perspectives from which they are better positioned to interrogate their own context. Ontological awareness, or the capacity to identify the component parts of the previously taken for granted, is fostered. To be able to identify, reflect on, 'name' and explain the components of one's professional cultural security is to achieve a degree of ontological awareness which is potentially significant in the development of successful partnerships.

Q: Where does that leave us?

A: Looking beyond warmth and charisma.

There is value in exploring the territory beyond hitherto compartmentalised professions and using inter-disciplinary partnerships to address intractable social problems. Such expeditions benefit from the provision of research. Questions abound: are bilateral or multi-agency deals more effective? Are there ways to foster ontological awareness? What training would facilitate inter-disciplinary work? Can structures be designed which lessen the significance of 'liking'? How can professionals work together effectively? Some practitioners doubt the wisdom of the approach and criticise those who are seen as accepting such hegemony without question but the scale of policies, almost all enacted since 1997, designed to be implemented through partnerships requires a response. Engaging with the potential synergy generated by inter-professional work and examining ways to build positive outcomes as well as avoiding duplication and lack of co-ordination suggest a logic which goes beyond common sense. The positive possibilities presented by the encounter with professional difference and otherness have yet to be fully identified whilst the scope for conflict has been noted. Existing approaches have not succeeded in achieving inclusion but some pilot projects have revealed ideas from which larger scale programmes may learn. Research has the scope to identify how to ensure initiatives are not undermined by professional conflicts but provide the opportunity for innovation and creativity.

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