

Riding the dragon: developing inter-agency systems for supporting children

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'Better inter-agency working' has been the oft-quoted remedy to many reviews of services to support vulnerable children and young people, and yet outside the realms of tightly focused specialist teams it seems to be very difficult to achieve. Georgina Glenny here reviews three case studies of interdisciplinary and inter-agency working to examine some of the reasons for the difficulties and some of the factors that contribute to success. Her findings suggest that, however 'loose-knit' they are, members of children's services can work together effectively if they feel themselves to be part of a common project served by an inclusive communication system. In the successful case studies the 'common project' was defined by an agreed central purpose to guide action within a defined geographical locality. Central to achieving this purpose was a carefully managed series of communication feedback loops to ensure good quality information was being shared at all levels. With this communication system in place the complex system of relationships and actions that resulted could be reflected upon and continually tweaked to ensure that 'project purpose' was achieved or at least 'worked towards' in a managed way.

Key words: inter-agency, children's services, communication systems, complexity.

Introduction

In this article I report on three case studies of inter-agency support for local partnerships of schools, carried out over a four-year period. The first was initiated as a result of the concerns of local schools about the support they were able

to galvanise for vulnerable children. The second and third provided two alternative solutions to many of the issues raised in the first. A key theme emerging from the case studies was that of control of the working environment. In the first case study everyone seemed to feel subject to forces outside their control and, as the researcher tracking down possible causes for this, I began to fancifully personify the force as a dragon: it was powerful, it demanded ritual sacrifice which might or might not appease, for example, the procedures for statutory assessment, and yet it was also mythical, because the agency must, in reality, surely be with the human players? So where does the agency lie? How had individuals lost this feeling of control and how might they recover it to enable them to collectively deliver effective services for children?

Case study 1. 'The system isn't working!'

The children and families in case study 1 represent a vulnerable group drawing from an urban estate with high indices for economic disadvantage, alcohol and drug use and single-parent families. The six schools in the sample (an upper school and feeder middle and first schools) are experienced at working with children with a variety of special needs and have used their additional funding in a range of ways to support the high incidence of children with special educational needs in their community.

A key feature of the interview data collected for case study 1 was a frequent reference to 'the system', for example interviewees talked of the 'school system', the 'system of support', the 'resourcing system', 'dysfunction of the system', 'inflexibility of the system', 'being let down by the system'. I was also frequently told 'the system doesn't work'. Indeed there were no examples in my interview data of a sense of human agency that could bring change. The impression I received was that 'we do its bidding', the 'system' is fed as we might, to use my earlier analogy, 'feed the dragon'. Essentially we are 'victims of the system!' And yet social systems are populated by intentional actors who can learn from their experiences, anticipate their

future, and adjust their behaviour accordingly. So how is it that I found such a dominant experience of being bound by the system – that nobody seemed to own? The system itself seemed to be a powerful agent that they could neither control nor ignore.

In order to explore the dysfunctions in the ‘system’, I followed through the experience of individual children to explore any common patterns that emerged. The following case example is anonymised and simplified but it is representative in terms of level of need and complexity of the individual scenarios schools needed to resolve.

Complexity of need

Daniel

Daniel is a nine-year-old boy with receptive language difficulties. He finds it difficult to concentrate and has poor basic levels of attainment. He is disruptive and deeply frustrated by his communication difficulties. He lives with his younger sister and his mother, who is depressed and finds his behaviour at home increasingly unmanageable. His speech and language therapy has been withdrawn because of poor attendance at appointments because mum is unable to organise transport and/or childcare. His first term at middle school is heading for breakdown because of his frequent absences and disruptive behaviour. Although mum would appreciate support, and this is seen to be a key element in Daniel’s situation, she does not meet the threshold of need to ensure social services involvement and there are no other resources available for this option. Daniel has also been assessed for the local language centre but there are no places free there at the moment. As a result Daniel is placed at a weekly residential school for children with moderate learning difficulties and emotional and behavioural problems. Daniel is unhappy about this because he doesn’t want to leave home and enjoys playing football with his mates at his old school.

This placement will incur costs of £25,000 as opposed to the £1,425 of a mainstream placement, or the £3,500 at a language centre. In educational terms it will offer smaller classes and ensure access to regular speech and language support. However the transition is difficult for Daniel because nobody in the new school understands his speech and the football is at such a low standard that he no longer enjoys it.

Systemic failure

This example illuminates some of the ways in which the organisation of relationships and resources to support children’s inclusion in school can operate to produce poor value for money and counterproductive outcomes. It could be argued that more successful case studies could have been selected, but the pattern of data overall suggested that there were clear systemic failures in the organisation of the

services that required systemic solutions. These systemic failures are not a function of particular field workers or a local response to the legislative framework but a frequently seen by-product of well intentioned national policies (see, for example, the findings of the Audit Commission, 2002, and Beek, 2002). Unpicking the nature of this failure in the current case study, the following issues emerged:

- young people in need are often in assessment limbo for considerable periods of time
- information is lost in the transition between schools
- the individual focus of the assessment process restricts discussion of the structural issues affecting a number of young people
- the assessment process uses up most of the time, leaving support personnel little remaining resource for therapeutic intervention
- threshold gateways to professional help mean intervention is often too late, with the child’s/family’s circumstances having deteriorated to a point where they are not easily helped
- children and families perceived as having problems may be receiving small amounts of uncoordinated help from multiple sources
- children were receiving less preferred solutions that were more expensive than preferred solutions that were unavailable
- the lack of coordination of services made the process of gaining statutory assessment difficult and time consuming
- there was a high incidence of crisis management
- there were disincentives for inclusive practice – a tension between the imperative to define individual need created by the funding mechanism and policies to provide inclusive contexts for children.

Thus the organisation of the support services was problematic in a number of ways, with the identified areas of dysfunction both interlinked and apparently intractable. Most significantly there seemed to be no self-correcting mechanisms – problems were recognised but it was impossible for any one person or agency, acting alone, to overcome them. For this reason it was important to represent the communication systems operating around this group of schools. To explore this I adopted tools for system analysis developed by Checkland and Scholes (1999) and attempted to represent this particular communication system by drawing the relationships using a ‘rich picture’.

Figure 1 illustrates why school personnel were feeling so frustrated and the issues seemed so irresolvable. Firstly, the issues raised and expressed by individual head teachers were not being heard by anybody who could do anything about them. At different times, different head teachers had expressed concerns but hadn’t been able to resolve them. There was no forum for consensus or resolution. Secondly, the plethora of support services available required a large number of communication links for head teachers and special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) to service in order to achieve help. Further, at any given time most of these people were away from their office on case

work and so were not easily contactable and, consequently, each of the links in the diagram had to be repeatedly travelled before contact was made – a process taking very significant proportions of SENCO time. Thirdly, at times of crisis, the already overstretched support services could rarely give the speedy response necessary to provide school personnel with the support they needed. As a result schools, having invested time in seeking help, often did not receive it and were left to deal with these situations alone. School personnel, not surprisingly, experienced considerable stress because they felt both out of their depth and under time pressure. Meanwhile the support service personnel felt they were often being used inappropriately by schools and had developed various ways of keeping these insatiable demands at bay so that they could protect time to do ‘at least something properly’.

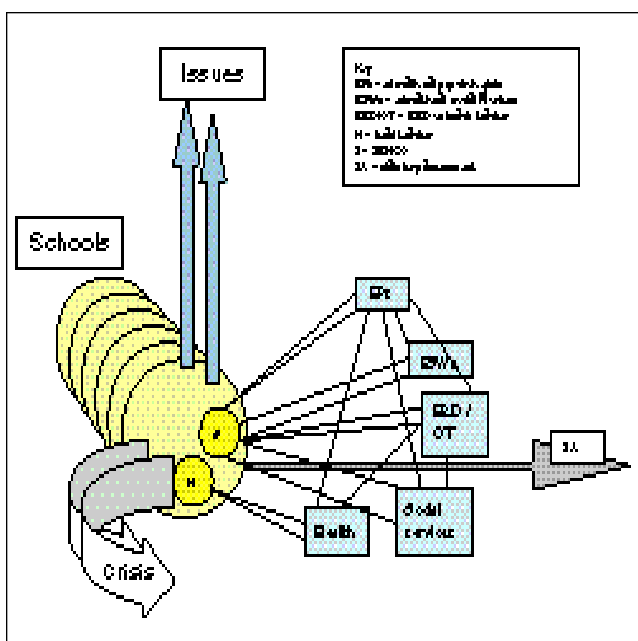


Figure 1. Case study 1, communication systems

The communication channels represented in figure 1 illustrate the difficulties facing an individual trying to achieve action for change within such a complex net of relationships. For example, if individual support workers were unilaterally to decide to prioritise early interventions they would quickly find themselves with an impossible case load and would be seen not to be meeting their statutory duties. If a service decides to shift its operations from individual case work to a consultancy-based approach – for example, helping schools with issues that effect groups of children and developing in-school skills and practices and policies that will ultimately support them in being more inclusive – the time available for detailed case work for complex cases disappears. Meanwhile the need for resolution of complex cases just creates pressure in another part of the system – for schools and for other case workers. Thus, even if the innovation is perceived to be successful by some members of the ‘system’, knock-on effects can be problematic for others who may not be involved and/or have no understanding of the original decision-making. It can also be seen here that small systems,

for example individual service practices, are nested within a larger system, in this case the locality team, and need to be operating in relation to that larger system. In case study 1 this coherence was absent.

At the same time the availability or perceived quality of one part of the system influences how the system is used. School staff have little time to spend on chasing support and, therefore, a service which is difficult to access quickly becomes unused and other solutions to the problems are found. Thus the actions of uncoordinated individuals and small groups set up channels of activity that direct the flow of subsequent action. As these patterns emerge they create anticipations in the minds of other members of the system and the channels deepen. In mapping the system these quirks or redirections of practice are of particular interest, because they illuminate the ways in which past behaviour comes to control and limit future behaviour. As Vickers (1995) argues, a system, ‘if left alone ... will regulate itself’ (p. 43), however not necessarily in relation to the purposes for which it was set up. Are we inevitably bound by these constraints, or is it possible to ‘ride the dragon’ and to harness the energies and creativity engendered by joint action? For effective resolution of systemic problems of this kind individuals have to have the understandings and the mechanisms to act in concert. But can this orchestration of local interaction be achieved? The evidence from case studies 2 and 3 suggest that it can.

Case study 2. Riding the dragon in an urban context

Case study 2 was based on an initiative developed as a direct response to the concerns raised by case study 1 and aimed to maximise the responsiveness, effectiveness and coherence of the local education authority (LEA) pupil support services to a group of school communities clustered into a school partnership. The partnership consisted of 15 schools: one secondary, two special, three middle and nine first schools. The pupil support services included educational psychologists, educational social workers, emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD) outreach teachers and advisory teachers for special educational needs.

This case study reviewed the same group of schools as were involved in the previous case study, with the addition of the other half of the partnership, and interviews were held with many of the same people who contributed to the original study. The study was carried out one year after the introduction of the initiative, and 18 months after case study 1 was completed. The data from the first study was therefore used as a baseline for comparison with the data from this study (see Glenny, 2001).

Developing a common communication system

The initiative, entitled Integrated Support Services (ISS), was designed as a strand of an Education Action Zone (EAZ) bid, which meant it was supported by a clear project

and sometimes were more appropriately referred to the ISS core group for action at the level of the school partnership. As the records of the SCT meetings were considered at the core group meeting, issues and concerns were automatically taken forward.

Key functions of the Integrated Support Service core group

The collating of evidence from the SCT provides the ISS core group with regular and comprehensive data about patterns of provision and school priorities, and issues and concerns across the partnership. This gives the core group a clearing-house function, receiving a continuous flow of information about the functioning of the support system on the ground, and allowing the group the opportunity to reflect on current practices and to be well informed in planning future action.

The ISS coordinator plays a key role in the operation of this group, collating information from other forums to bring to the group, and taking forward proposed action with the sanction of the LEA heads of service and partnership head teachers' groups. The coordinator was also influential in setting a problem-solving and activist culture within the group so that there was a continual flow of projects being set up and evaluated to resolve issues raised by the SCT. The ISS core group prioritised actions that responded to issues raised by a number of schools, but also supported individual school projects that were concerned with innovative inclusive practice.

Partnership-wide projects initiated by the ISS included:

- home-school link workers
- language development initiatives in the early years
- staff development, for example regular SENCO meetings and behaviour management sessions for newly qualified teachers (NQTs)
- specialist resources to be shared by schools, for example additional EBD outreach, and speech therapy
- support in managing difficult situations, for example the Rapid Response initiative and the social work helpline.

In the evaluation data (Glenny, 2001) each school gave an example of a project to develop inclusive practice that had been supported to some degree by discussion in SCTs and the core group. Support included help in the formulation and/or the review of the project and, in some cases, financial assistance from the core group. Head teachers stressed the value of support that could be quickly available to back problem-solving initiatives, without having to postpone implementation until the next financial year when the momentum for change was lost or the young people's needs had become more serious and moved beyond being able to benefit from the proposed school adaptations.

Drawing on a full range of expert knowledge: linking multi-agency networks

As the SCTs developed it became clear some issues were difficult to resolve because of gaps in the areas of expertise held by the team. The two areas of particular concern related to child protection and mental health issues and so, in the second year of the project, the consultation teams negotiated to be joined on a regular basis by the schools link social worker. The issues concerning mental health and social services were not completely resolved within the period of the evaluation but the involvement of the core group ensured the issues were being dealt with at an appropriate strategic level and resulted in productive pilot work being put in place.

Case study 3. Riding the dragon in a rural context

Case study 3 focused on a locality response to concerns similar to those identified in case study 1 (for a fuller account of this case study see Roaf, 2002, Glenny, 2000). However there were significant differences to the context reviewed in case study 2. Firstly, the school partnership catchment area was a market town, providing a focus for a predominantly rural population above average in terms of socio-economic indicators. Levels of need were lower and there were substantially fewer resources compared to the school partnership in case study 2. Secondly, it differed significantly in being a grass roots initiative, starting with no additional initial funding or policy back-up. Thirdly, it was from the beginning a multi-agency project with significant participation from voluntary services, rather than being an interdisciplinary education project that invited in other agencies at a later stage in development (see Glenny, 2000).

In case study 3 there was a similar primary concern with getting together to share mutual concerns, but this time the solution was rather different. Instead of setting up a tight-knit core group, all those working with children and young people received an invitation to an open meeting entitled 'the Network'. The Network met twice termly for a meeting of one hour, and provided an open forum for informal discussion and the sharing of issues and concerns for interested field workers across agencies. Minutes were circulated to 60 people representing over 20 agency and community groups. The Network provided opportunities for discussion of key issues, for example sharing concerns about different professions' notions of confidentiality, and raising awareness of other agencies' roles, responsibilities and potential resources. The open and loose structure of the Network meetings allowed for fluidity in the membership that ensured all interested field workers in the area could attend.

Network discussions resulted in the identification of gaps in provision to which, in the first instance, individual agencies responded. An example of this was triggered by the identification of a small number of adolescents who were tying up education and social services resources.

Discussion of this at the Network resulted in a local GP instigating a review of mental health services for young people in his practice and the subsequent appointment of a clinical psychologist in that practice. This in turn released education and social services resources for work with other young people.

However the size and loose organisation of the Network meant that issues discussed were not always carried through into actions, particularly if action required inter-agency collaboration. Rather than losing the inclusiveness of the Network structure, the group proposed that a steering group should be set up to facilitate project development. Personnel for this group were drawn from interested members of the Network, ensuring representation from each of the key agencies and from partnership schools.

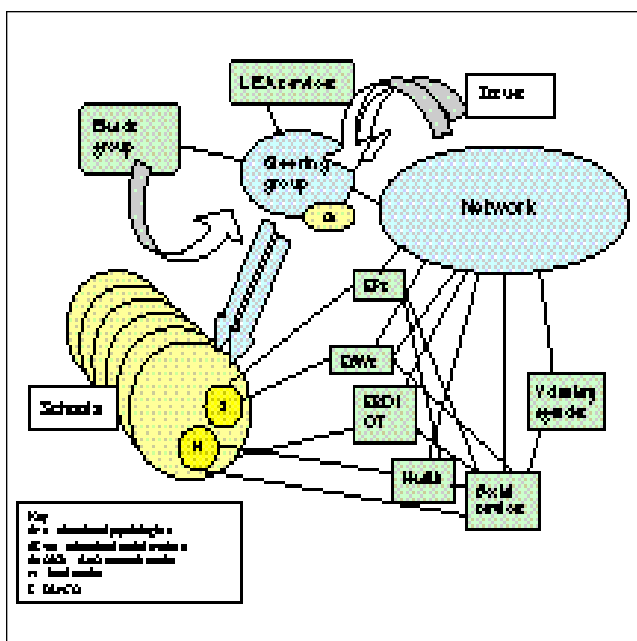


Figure 3. Case study 3, communication systems

With these two groups the Network had obtained a feedback loop of a different type but with a similar function to case study 2 (see figure 3). And, in the same way, it used this structure to identify key issues that could be a focus of joint activity. Objectives identified at the time of the evaluation were:

- to focus on early intervention to raise achievement
- to support good relationships between school and family life
- to address the particular needs of a rural community distant from many city-based services
- to seek solutions to gaps in provision identified through the Network and its members
- to promote inter-agency cooperation, training and information sharing.

To illustrate the nature of the operation of the Network across agency boundaries, a brief review of the Network response to the issue of early intervention follows.

Field workers interviewed illustrated how their given thresholds for involvement precluded being involved in early intervention. Shortage of resources in the services led to their work being largely crisis driven. Thus, whilst their personal view was that much of the work they did would have been more effective if they had intervened at an earlier stage, they were unable to justify intervention before critical indicators (for example, levels of absence from school) had been reached. Early intervention was also problematic from the point of view of gaining access to sensitive work with young people and their families. Intervention from professionals in social work and education is often deemed to be threatening and therefore only justified *in extremis*.

In the sessions observed it was a key theme of the Network steering group to identify exactly what types of early intervention would be supportive and acceptable and how these might be implemented. Issues discussed included:

- young people failing to attend therapy sessions because of transport difficulties
- young people not having good access to information/support with health issues
- difficulties in providing support for young people at transition/stress points in their lives
- difficulties in supporting young people and their families in the early stages of relationship breakdown (with school and/or family).

A range of solutions was suggested and a small grant from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation provided funds for project work prioritised by the Network:

- to provide child care and transport for parents having difficulties in taking their children to therapy sessions
- support for the Bodyzone initiative providing young people with regular access to health information and care on the upper school site (see Harrison and Bullock in this issue)
- the employment of a family links worker to work with vulnerable children/young people and their families.

Field workers subsequently interviewed described successful case examples of the use of all three initiatives. People not directly attending Network meetings, for example the head teachers interviewed, were able to identify significant benefits that had come from the Network and clearly saw its function as problem solving in orientation, resulting in a better use of existing special educational needs resources. Examples given of whole partnership projects included: the effective training that resulted from a request from the heads' group to the steering group to improve the skills of learning support assistants (LSAs) in managing pupils with challenging behaviour; the SENCO group; improved transition arrangements; the creation of a Directory of Resources for the area; and the development of a resource centre for teachers and LSAs.

Overall there was clear evidence in the evaluation to show that the Network had generated inter-agency solutions to problems that, without the Network, could have been seen as single-agency quagmires.

Common themes in case studies 2 and 3

The significance of these two studies is the way in which the functioning of the support services was improved with few extra resources. The improvement itself was also striking in terms of the much more positive experiences of those working within the revised systems. Case studies 2 and 3 provide locally customised solutions to similar problems, illustrated in case study 1. However, the solutions emerged in a different way, at different levels in the organisation and in response to different priorities. Although the two areas had different solutions to the problems they faced, in respect of the models they developed there was a lot of underlying commonality in the systemic aspects of the way they worked. Some of the key themes that emerged are listed below:

1. In both cases there was a development of what Vickers (1995), writing in the 1960s on his experience of working across civil service departments, has described as an *appreciative system*. That is, that communication is happening at all levels and is organised in feedback loops such that issues can be discussed and action taken that may itself change the nature of the system. In case study 2 the core group was set up to receive and respond to concerns. The group identified the need for a clearing-house at school level in the form of a school consultation team, and subsequently developed 'Rapid Response' to manage crisis situations. In each case the appreciative system was remodelled to meet identified need. In the same way, in case study 3, the Network was set up as a forum for sharing concerns and, as the Network members learnt from their shared experience, they set up a steering group to ensure issues discussed at the Network were resolved.

2. As Vickers also identified, maintaining joint purpose can often be difficult. One feature of both case studies 2 and 3 was the clear focus of the project. In both cases this is best described as, 'How can schools in this geographical area be supported in providing the best possible educational opportunities for their most vulnerable and disaffected members?' This was in refreshing contrast to case study 1, where purposes had become fragmented into the secondary aims of particular organisational groups.

3. In order to monitor the system of relationships and maintain focus on the central purpose, case studies 2 and 3 had someone in the role of the 'systems minder' – the coordinator of the core group (see figure 2) and of the Network steering group (see figure 3) respectively. The systems minder seemed to have a role to ensure the core groups carried out the following responsibilities:

- guarding project purpose
- receiving issues and concerns

- freeing up communication links/feedback loops
- orchestrating relationships
- monitoring task completion
- deciding what needs to be held tight and what can be left loose.

In their extensive study of collaborative practice Huxham and Vangen (2005) stress the importance of this key role:

the nurturing process must be continuous and permanent. What we mean by nurturing is a continual focus on actively managing the collaboration ... implied in this is an expectation that a collaboration is unlikely to be self sustaining so there is a requirement for constant attention simply to keep it from spiralling into decline ...

(p. 80)

It was interesting that, in both case studies 2 and 3, this crucial role was played by a local support service worker given some time and administrative support for the role. It would be interesting to explore how significant the associated collegiality, and in-depth local knowledge that they could bring to the role, contributed to their success.

4. Each of the case studies demonstrated a dominant discourse that was positive and problem solving in orientation. In both forums this allowed the explicit discussion of tensions in resource allocation, in particular between proactive 'upstream' work and reactive 'downstream' work, and between supporting individual needs and inclusive practice. Roaf (2002) has applied the terms 'upstream' and 'downstream' to the monitoring of the timing of interventions and to the connection that exists between long and short term responses to problems. The analogy of taking a walk upstream to see why we are finding bodies in the river downstream is helpful in drawing attention to the continuity of experience and the role of context in the definition of need (see figure 4). This emphasis on continuity also helps avoid the often rather artificial polarisation of early intervention versus crisis intervention, and allows discussion and a wider consideration of what good upstream and downstream work might mean. The focus on the context – making upstream safe – rather than the individual child, also resonates with the agenda for inclusion that any support system should be trying to promote.

Interestingly, the innovations developed by case studies 2 and 3 were predominantly upstream initiatives. The gaps in provision were largely perceived to be around earlier intervention and the development of an extension to universal provision – an expansion of the educational gateway for young people. Thus, projects involved:

- working with teachers, teaching assistants and parents to help them manage behaviour better
- setting up study groups to ensure inclusive solutions for children with emotional and behavioural problems
- having quiet places to go in school where children could choose to take time out from the classroom if they were feeling upset or angry

- having home-school link workers available to have early conversations with children, parents or schools when indicators suggested problems might be developing.

The significant downstream initiative in case study 2 was the introduction of the Rapid Response panel (see figure 2). Where 'gaps in provision' were seen to be around downstream services they tended to be in the areas of mental health and child protection. Interestingly, too, despite the lack of senior service managers involved in case study 3, the extended membership of the Network had allowed better 'on the ground' solutions to these inter-agency concerns than in case study 2.

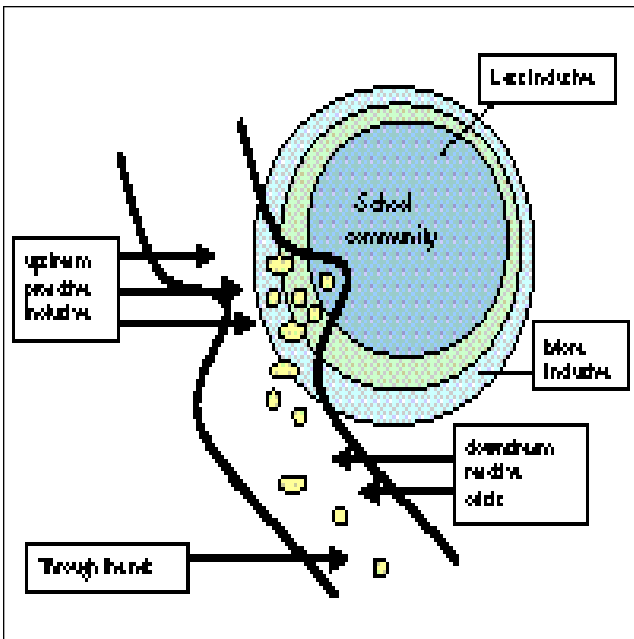


Figure 4. Upstream, downstream

5. Both case studies demonstrated a policy of minimum change and, in particular, of thoroughly reviewing what was happening before changing anything. In each case the first step was not about 'managing change' or 'reorganisation' but about building a reflective capacity into a current organisational structure. This reflective capacity allowed the members of the organisation to identify strengths and ensure they were acknowledged and enhanced. It also allowed them to explore and prioritise attention on weaknesses/dysfunctional elements in the system and to develop strategies to improve them. Crucially, the development of these strategies took place from the perspective of members of the whole organisation reflecting on themselves, not from the point of view of one part of the organisation, for example, a senior managers' group or an individual service. This also seemed to be linked to the building on continuity that engendered trust. As Sennett (1998) has argued, 'Social bonds take time to develop, slowly rooting into the cracks and crevices of institutions. The short time frame on institutions limits the ripening of informal trust ... "no long term" is a principle which corrodes trust, loyalty and mutual commitment ...' (p. 24)

6. In each case the projects had small amounts of independent funding that allowed their thinking to materialise quickly into action. This was clearly an important element in trust-building and raises the issue of subsidiarity. What is the appropriate size for a system to be operating independently and determining its own shape and form?

Structure and process

There were structural elements that can be pulled out from these studies. For example, the 'School Consultation Team', the 'Network', the 'core group' – but the organisation of these would seem to be best arranged/combined to meet the particular contexts, workforce available, strengths of that workforce and responsiveness to the community of a particular area. Each of these structures was a kind of communication node, although with differentiated functions.

Thus it could be seen that the Network had particular strengths in being inclusive: anyone who wanted to could be a member, and the group had representatives from all key statutory agencies and a number of local voluntary agencies. However, whilst this allowed everybody to participate in the agenda setting, the group was too large and attendance too erratic for the group to resolve difficulties raised and to coordinate action – hence the need for the steering group.

The SCT had particular advantages in coordinating interdisciplinary work and in supporting schools in seeking more inclusive solutions, thereby reducing the number of children requiring more expensive downstream initiatives. However the SCT is expensive in support-worker time and so may be most effective in areas of high need.

The core group provided the crucial reflective and decision-making capacity so essential for an appreciative system to function, and it also provides the hub for links into neighbouring/meta systems.

The nature of the system – can we tame the dragon?

Looking at the rich pictures made it clear that a lot of inter-agency collaboration is not about collaborative activity as such, but about communicating effectively with regard to *individual* pieces of work, ensuring that the patchwork of *individual* effort in relation to a particular family, made sense. It was therefore primarily a system of communication, and the effectiveness of the individual work was crucially dependent on the quality of the communication system. So, what are the characteristics of this system that make it so difficult to maintain?

The analysis so far has borrowed heavily from the systems perspective of Checkland and Scholes (1999), and discussion

of the system follows that of an engineering analogy, refining the product in use to evolve an ever-better solution to the requirements of the situation. However, for a number of reasons, this simple feedback system did not seem to model fully what I was seeing in the evaluations.

Firstly, the role of the *systems minder* was so crucial because the 'appreciative system' (Vickers, 1995) appeared to be such a fragile and delicate specimen. At any moment, decisions made by individual members could threaten the well-being of the whole system. Evidence from other LEAs conducting similar experiments with the support services had always broken down around such issues: what I was observing was much less stable than the robust feedback system suggested by systems analysis. Secondly, despite the urgent and regular calls for better collaboration between agencies over the last 30 years, extensively documented by Roaf (2002), this has been difficult to achieve outside the well-defined teams organised around particular and clearly designated conditions (reported, for example, by Atkinson, Wilkin, Stott and Kinder, 2001). Thirdly, sustaining particular practices with large loose-knit groups is difficult because of issues of ownership over time.

... because of the dynamics of intention among these individuals, a system emerges ... they may not remember why or how the organization first occurred or why the given organizational structure is chosen over other possible forms.

(Marion, 1999, p. 29)

One of the reasons for the fragility of the system is the non-linear nature of the relationships within the system, so that when we refine the system it is impossible to anticipate the outcomes of actions taken. These observations reflect the patterning evident in complexity theory (Lewin, 1993). Complexity theory is a framework for analysing complex dynamic systems that have non-linear relationships between inputs and outputs. The classic example of this kind of system was originally described by meteorologists attempting to explain the unpredictability of weather systems, and has come to be known in common discourse through reference to 'the butterfly effect'. On a particular day a butterfly flaps its wings over the Amazon rainforest causing turbulence, which is amplified by particular atmospheric conditions and sets in motion events that lead to a storm over Chicago; the following day the same butterfly, behaving in the same way, creates no consequences for the weather system. This notion of amplification and attenuation is helpful in understanding communication systems where, for example, notions such as trust provide significant amplification and distrust significant attenuation of communication effect.

Viewing inter-agency contexts through the lens of complexity theory draws attention to the continual maintenance requirements of the system so evident in case studies 2 and 3. This also resonates with Huxham and Vangen's strapline for managing collaborative work, 'nurture, nurture, nurture' (p. 80). It is therefore probably unrealistic to think we can ever tame the dragon, to control the system or to predict when amplification or attenuation may take place. Having charge of the elements of the system will always be thwarted by the complexity of the interactions. But if our feedback systems are sensitive enough and our 'minders' vigilant enough and skilful enough to tweak the system we can capitalise on emerging good practice and the particular contributions of our colleagues, and hope to 'ride the dragon'.

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