



FEATURE

Research perspectives on service integration

Walter Humes

University of Paisley, Scotland

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Research perspectives on service integration

Walter Humes reviews some of the issues of collaboration and interprofessional working in the context of recent policy developments in education

In June 2005 the third of a series of conferences organised by the NEXUS research group within the School of Education in the University of Aberdeen took place. These conferences have focused on issues of integration, collaboration and interprofessional working in the context of recent policy developments in education and related fields. They have attracted a diverse audience including policy-makers, local authority officials and practitioners with varied professional backgrounds. An innovation in 2005 was the inclusion of a seminar designed specifically to report on the findings of research studies carried out on aspects of service integration and collaborative working. This article offers a commentary on some of the questions raised in the papers.

The current interest in interprofessional working and integrated children's services has its origins in several sources. There have been high-profile cases where the failure of professionals to share information and intervene effectively has allowed child abuse to continue unchecked, sometimes resulting in the tragic death of the victim. The reports on these cases have recommended much better communication between the various agencies (police, social work, hospitals, schools), clearer lines of responsibility, better training for case workers, and firmer managerial control.

Another strand of influence has been the introduction of Integrated Community Schools which seek to provide an improved level of service to parents and children, bringing together education, social services, health provision and community development under one roof and avoiding the need to negotiate separate bureaucratic systems. That at least is the theory, though early evaluations have indicated that there remains a gap between aspiration and achievement. The language used by different professionals, the varied structures within which they have traditionally operated, their different career paths, including their education and training, all create areas of potential confusion and misunderstanding. There are also sensitive issues to do with status and professional identity which are difficult to explore in ways that do not exacerbate rather than diminish tensions.

At a political level, there has been growing

recognition of the need to develop policy on an integrated basis, using 'joined up' thinking rather than relying on the fragmented approach of separate government departments pursuing strategies which fail to take proper account of the way their sphere of operation impacts on other policy objectives. In the area of social disadvantage and educational underachievement, for example, the influence of health, housing, poverty, crime, unemployment, and community resources on the capacity of children to benefit from what schools offer is now widely acknowledged. Again, one of the implications of this is that professionals working in different public services need to develop a better understanding of the work of colleagues who may share many of the same social objectives, in terms of improving the life chances of children and families, but who may start from a different set of operational assumptions.

Against this background, the papers presented at the conference offered timely insights into both the obstacles to interprofessional understanding and the practical strategies which might have a positive impact on the experience of children. The research by Elspeth McCartney, Sue Ellis and James Boyle was concerned with the way in which teachers and speech and language therapists (SLTs) can work together to meet the needs of those children with language impairment, a condition that affects their capacity to access the curriculum and to develop in ways which allow them to reach their potential. In their use of terms such as 'integration', 'joint working' and 'partnership', the authors invoked the discourse of interprofessionalism that is now to the fore. They showed, however, that there are different models of interprofessional working ranging from the relatively weak (liaison), through intermediate (cooperation), to relatively strong (collaboration). Their conceptual analysis was balanced by a realistic sense of the occupational frameworks and practical constraints under which both teachers and SLTs have to work. These include the fact that whereas SLTs are mostly employed within the National Health Service and are regulated as allied health professionals by the Health Professions Council, teachers are employed by local authorities and have to be registered with the General Teaching Council for Scotland. Demand for the expertise of SLTs outstrips supply and this sets limits to the service they can provide, even allowing for the input of

support workers. The pressures of the school day mean that the time available for teachers to work cooperatively with SLTs is limited.

McCartney and her colleagues took account of these constraints in the Language Support Model which they proposed, setting out a time-frame for action, the people involved, the purposes of meetings, decisions to be taken and necessary documentation. They argued that at present a fully collaborative model is not possible but that regular and open communication, which allows for the sharing of information, should contribute to improved language teaching, drawing on both the teacher's expertise in learning and the SLT's specialist knowledge of speech, language and communication development.

Joan Forbes in her contribution was also concerned with the way in which teachers and therapists might work constructively to offer an improved service. An important part of her analysis was the account she offered of the legislative and policy context of recent developments. She stated: 'The central focus of current Scottish policy and practice is on user-focused children's services and interagency working for social inclusion and social justice'. The philosophy of Integrated Community Schools (ICS) is aimed at tackling the cycle of disadvantage which has prevented some 20% of the school population making real progress in terms of educational achievement and attainment. However, for this to be effective, the various professionals involved (psychologists, teachers, social workers, health service personnel) will have to learn new ways of working. The scale of the challenge should not be underestimated. As Forbes observed, 'Moves to integrate service provision will not be easy or straightforward and a number of practical and cultural problems will be encountered in the changing governance, management, leadership and practice of professional groups'. Different occupations develop different cultures which, in turn, shape the professional identities of members. To question these can be unsettling and even threatening. The task, therefore, is to find ways of opening up interprofessional dialogue - through, for example, shared staff development opportunities - in ways that allow serious reflection on cherished beliefs leading to constructive transformations of attitude and practice.

Forbes argued that the concept of social capital has considerable potential in terms of enabling this process to take place. She acknowledged that social capital is a slippery term but its focus on shared understandings, reciprocal relationships, supportive networks, and developing trust clearly has relevance to interagency working. The classification of

different types of social capital - bonding, bridging and linking - allows for a thoughtful exploration of the different kinds of ties that exist (and might exist) within and between different professional groups. The paper concluded by suggesting that the various forms of social capital can serve as useful tools to identify and analyse the kinds of transformations in thinking and practice that the new policy agenda requires.

Mike Cowie and Audrey Hendry also invoked the concept of social capital in their study of headteachers' perspectives on Integrated Community Schools. Part of the rationale for such schools is that they provide sites for interagency working which should offer an improved service to pupils, parents and communities, thereby enabling more youngsters to reach their potential and so benefiting both individuals and society as a whole. Cowie and Hendry traced the origins of the ICS initiative and its representation in policy documents, noting the limited research evidence from the experience of American Full Service Schools to support the claim that interagency working necessarily leads to improved outcomes for service users.

The paper posed a series of important questions relating to the leadership of Integrated Community Schools. How do headteachers define their role in this new context? What are their views on collaboration? How do they regard interagency working? How effective do they consider emerging patterns of practice to be? A number of interesting views emerged from the interviews they conducted. Although most headteachers broadly supported the principles underpinning Integrated Community Schools, many complained about the lack of consultation prior to the introduction of the policy. Issues of power and control surfaced, with headteachers wishing to retain overall authority in relation to projects which involved interagency cooperation. This is perhaps understandable since the school is the site in which such projects are located and, should anything go wrong, headteachers would certainly be seen as bearing some of the responsibility. At the same time, as Cowie and Hendry acknowledged at the end of their paper, it would be worth accessing the views of partners from social work and health to see if they perceived school hierarchies as sometimes limiting what they felt was needed in particular cases. In collaborative working, the nature of leadership needs to be considered carefully. Traditional formal structures are likely to be less successful than more flexible arrangements which distribute leadership functions within an agreed set of aims and priorities. A change of this sort cannot be imposed. It takes time, willingness to adapt and to engage in a process

of social learning. The role ambiguity among headteachers which Cowie and Hendry reported can be interpreted either as evidence of resistance to these requirements or simply as an indication that the ICS initiative is still at an early stage of implementation. They cited Michael Fullan's notion of 'interactive professionalism', which moves beyond collaboration among committed individuals to more firmly rooted institutional partnerships, as a possible signpost for future developments.

The fourth and final research paper at the conference, by Leila Holm, looked at the way in which a number of policy developments have combined to impact on the guidance system in Scottish secondary schools. These include not only the introduction of Integrated Community Schools but also reforms in the structure of promoted posts following the recommendations of the McCrone report, and the general aim of promoting social inclusion and reducing underachievement.

Holm's study focused on the perceptions of a wide range of stakeholders. Within the schools, the views of managers, teachers and pupils were all represented. What was evident, however, was that there were significant variations amongst teachers depending on whether they are primarily subject specialists, or whether they have a particular remit for guidance, support for learning or behaviour support. One of the implications is the need to get the balance right between, on the one hand, generalist understanding and effective communication between all the partners and, on the other hand, the provision of dedicated specialist expertise where necessary. It is unreasonable to expect everyone involved to be equally competent in all the forms of support that might be required and, from the pupils' perspective, what matters is having a trusted point of contact who can be relied upon either to deal with the issues directly or to call upon specialists if required. The external perceptions - of parents, social workers, psychologists, careers advisers, health personnel - were also interesting because they served to question some of the assumptions of school staff. While there may be a shared desire among all parties to improve the

quality of service for children and young people, there are likely to be divergent views on the best means of achieving this and the respective roles of the various professionals involved. The challenges in terms of mutual understanding, respect and trust are considerable. Several of the respondents emphasised the importance of good personal relationships as well as effective systems and clear lines of responsibility.

Underlying all of this are difficult questions to do with how professional identities are formed and transformed. For some teachers their subject allegiance is central - they see themselves primarily as teachers of English or Mathematics or Science. For others, the subject allegiance may be less important than a commitment to learning in general or the personal welfare of pupils. There is also a developmental aspect to this. Some teachers remain relatively static in their view of themselves and their role throughout their career, while others undergo transformations and redefine how they see their function in the light of experience. For Integrated Community Schools to succeed, there has to be an openness to change, a preparedness to look at traditional boundaries and to explore new ways of doing things, in association with other professionals coming from different backgrounds.

The heightened expectations for schools to meet the social inclusion agenda mean that the environment in which teachers and headteachers work has become more complex and that they now have to see themselves as part of multi-agency networks which extend beyond the school, rather than as autonomous professionals. Taken together, what the papers at the conference suggested is that there is a considerable amount of goodwill on the part of most professionals but that they are encountering a range of conceptual challenges and operational difficulties as they try to respond to policy directives.

Note: The full text of the papers is published by the School of Education, University of Aberdeen, as Research Paper 13, *Children's Services Integration in Scottish Schools: Research Seminar Proceedings* (2006), edited by Joan Forbes.