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Keeping your balance on a floating raft: engaging with voices in collaborative working between statutory and non- statutory sectors in services for children and young people

Joanna Oliver

Introduction

This chapter documents the initial findings from an auto/biographical study exploring collaborative working within service provision for children and young people. The study was initiated during a time when service provision was organised within New Labour's 'integrated children's services' (ICS) and when partnership and collaboration was valuable currency for practitioners and organisations within the ICS (Cleaver et al, 2008).

Since the commencement of the coalition government and associated austerity-induced efficiency savings, this study has perhaps become more relevant than ever, as an opportunity to convey the stories of practitioners working with children and young people in a context where uncertainty is an expected normality. As one research collaborator, Ronny, a manager of a training organisation for practitioners who work with children and young people, stated in his interview: 'It's a constant change. A constant trying to keep your balance on a floating raft.'

The intention of this chapter is to convey the voices of non-statutory sector workers, George, Lina, Ronny, Sian, Amber, Andrew and Louise and to illuminate some of the tensions that exist in the organisation of contemporary children's services. All research collaborators have agreed to their voices being represented, although pseudonyms are used to protect their full identity.

The research methodology

Although not a central focus of this chapter, it is important to note the relevance of the research methodology and its relationship to the subject matter. The approach taken has its foundation in narrative and auto/biographical approaches, whereby the stories of the people interviewed, the research collaborators, are relational to my own story, as an academic, as a lecturer, as a doctoral student and also as a professional who works for an Independent Fostering Provider. Stainton-Rogers (2003), refers to the need for social research in particular to 'illuminate corners' and as a methodology that is somewhat non-prescriptive, auto/biographical research requires the researcher to be receptive to the illumination of one's own corners. Embracing the bias and accepting oneself as part of the fabric of the research, as Reid (2008) proclaims, in 'praise of fuzziness', 'understanding is always an interpretive endeavour and we cannot escape the culture and historical circumstances which shape our understanding' (2008: 25). Thus, my own story is as much a part of this study, as the stories of my seven research collaborators and the researcher/researched dynamic is in some ways reinforced by the parallel process of researching collaborative approaches, via a collaborative approach to research. Gehart et al (2007) define 'insider research' and I position myself in a 'curious stance', as 'learner' in the research process (2007: 375).

Distinctions between the statutory and non-statutory sector

The motivation for this research is grounded in my own professional experiences and awareness that there was, and still is, a tension between statutory and non-statutory providers of services for children and young people. For the non-statutory sector (charities and voluntary organisations in particular), an awareness of professional networks and utilising them in partnership 'arrangements' has for a long time been the most effective way to maximise resources. As Lewis, (1999:256, cited in Harris, 2010: 25) determines: 'the voluntary sector has always sought a 'partnership' with the state'. Harris suggests that it is 'not whether the relationship between the two sectors should be conceptualized as a partnership now, but how the nature of this partnership has changed over time' (Harris, 2010: 25). What is of particular interest to me is notions of partnership in contemporary contexts, where equality is prioritised, hence my choice to study 'collaborative' working between statutory and non-statutory practitioners providing services for children and young people. My interest lays in the nature and implications of independence in a context that demands interdependence and how this is experienced, interpreted and narrated by those in the non-statutory sector. Drawing on Kearney (2003) this type of working does not always fulfil the 'cozy ring' that it conveys.

Lina, a Director of a charity providing befriending services to children, young people and families reflected that: 'There's a certain energy you can only find in the voluntary sector. That unique showing of skills and passion... I think it's because most people in the voluntary sector are driven here via their personal experiences.' This is a continual theme in the study, acknowledging the relationship between personal and professional trajectories. Writing about third-age career aspirations, King (2010) refers to making sense of professional identity through biography and narrative and this personal/professional interplay resonates in this study. Lina went on to say that 'As a creative person, I wanted to work in a creative environment where I can use *all* of my skills.'

Andrew, who works as a community and youth worker, remarked upon how much the directives of the statutory sector and in particular, funding preoccupation, influences the work that is undertaken at grass-roots level and how this is crucially related to dynamics of control and power:

...the voluntary sector do amazing work on very little and the voluntary sector's work is often governed by what pots of money they can get...it's all...swings and roundabouts about who's in charge. Those grants are handed out by the very organisations that control how they want you to work, so if their drive right now was to have accredited outcomes, there'd be lots of little pots available for that...That's where it becomes distorted, and that's where the emphasis of what you do with that money is always controlled by where you get the money from.

This is not restricted to politics of power and in the words of Amber, a Director of an Independent Fostering Provider, relates also to a sense of professional freedom to exercise the personal influences upon professional identity, 'I think we can be more intuitive, whilst the LA have to be more political. They might have that in their heart but aren't able to do what they'd love...like to do.'

Lina, who has worked for both the statutory and non-statutory sector and began her work with her current organisation as a volunteer, reflected upon the differences between the two sectors and the way that this influences engagement from people who use services. 'In the statutory sector, the emotional door (of the family) is very closed to you. The family do what they have to, to get you off their back...I don't want to work in the public sector, it's too limiting.' This is an aspect explored in Barrett's (2008) study into notions of 'hard to reach' families, where she determines that the focus is upon the service provision, rather than the families themselves being hard to reach, making the service more accountable for unlocking the 'emotional door' alluded to by Lina. Barrett highlights that some families tend to be 'resource hungry'(2008: 49) and that this is unappealing in a context that is dictated by targeting 'more for less'. As Andrew asserts, 'It's all target driven work, number crunching to me doesn't always equate to quality.'

Meeting targets...meeting needs...making money... staying viable

George is a social worker with almost three decades of experience in the statutory and non-statutory sectors and is currently a Senior Manager of an Independent Fostering Provider. He reflected on current contexts, telling me, 'Local Authorities are focused on Key Performance Indicators, targets etc, and how can we unlock a child's story if we are focused on that? It's a sign of the times that things have swung too far that way.' This is a view shared by Amber, 'It's quite difficult if the need is about money and we're about securing good outcomes. The balance isn't there. We are focused on long term aims...as we say...transforming children's lives.' Lina contributed to this by stating, 'We could tweak what we do but government and policies change so often that we could end up chasing our tails and it's important we're not having to chase it too much, so as to divert us from the core, front line service.'

The tension presented by targets and securing good outcomes influences professional relationships across sectors and can endanger organisations and projects, as Barrett (2008:99) highlights 'impatience for results does seriously and directly undermine the stability of projects'. It is undeniable that families who are 'harder to reach' and perhaps most in need, require more time invested in them and often also require a greater amount of resources. As one of Barrett's research respondents declared 'It doesn't tick the number boxes' (2008: 49). In reality, this is not merely a cause for unbridled frustration directed at statutory partners but necessitates care and diplomacy, as Lina told me 'We don't want to step on any toes but, erm, funding toes, let's be honest!' There is a deeper consideration within this, however and it is crucial to the exploration of collaborative working across statutory and non-statutory sectors. The relationship between the funders and the funded and how this interrelates with notions of independence and also professionalism, was conveyed by Lina:

I don't think there is any charity who is really independent because as long as a charity receives funding from a council, or even big lottery is a statutory funder, you are no longer independent because you have to jump through certain hoops. Most funders will fund you if you are also funded by the council. It shows you are professional, you are well governed.

Professional boundaries and professional identity

As inferred earlier, there seems to be a correlation between personal orientation and professional trajectory and that working within the non-statutory sector offers practitioners an environment that is congruent with their individuality. Ronny was clear about how he benefits from working in the non-statutory sector:

I stay because it's not boring, I've got a large amount of autonomy, it's developmental and it's sort of fitted my own values because I've been able to shape things individually and personally. It's almost like running your own business without as much risk. The flexibility suits me and my personality and my style of operating very, very well. It suits me much better than any other structure...So I'm thinking...could I work in somewhere that is highly structured?

This is echoed in the voice of Sian, who has worked in the field of social housing and community development for more than twenty years and reflected upon her decision not to undertake a social work qualification to complement her degree in sociology.

Well, why would I want to go and do social work...because it's too prescriptive. They're going to come and say to me... 'you need to do this with this family' and I'm going to say 'no I don't', do you know what I mean? So there was no way I was going to get on, so that's why I decided to not do it because I didn't want anyone dictating to me, this is what I should do, this is what I should do with this family, because of A and B.

Another factor for Sian is in being true to herself, 'sometimes my voice gets me into trouble but you know what, I have to be true to myself and for me, I've always had that passion for working with people and that thing about injustice.'

Andrew told me that he found professional boundaries restrictive and in many ways a hindrance to professional practice, although he recognised that there is a need for some type of framework. George defined professional practice as a combination of inherent attributes and focused learning and development, within a professional training environment:

Good people, in whatever job they do, need personality and common sense...if you have professional training on top of that, that can only help – because if you've got the training but not the personality and common sense, that's not great and I've seen that many times. Some times, some people don't get it right in those situations.

The sense of being true to self was evident in interviews with all research collaborators and perhaps austerity brings challenges to the synchronicity of personal values and professional norms, as Amber surmised:

[Being a] business and caring for children is a whole ethical consideration...I've come to terms with it in my head...We are in a fortunate position of being able to hold on to our values but still be a business and still work collaboratively, which is about communication, responsiveness, professionalism, presenting professionally, and so on.

Potentially, the notion of 'coming to terms with it [whatever that may be in a range of settings] in [one's] head', is a key justification for the role of reflective spaces, to nurture reflective and effective professional

practice. George stated quite simply that 'Reflective practice is important...and sometimes our LA colleagues struggle to do that'. It would seem that reference to statutory workers as 'colleagues' is an important foundation for beginning the process of collaborative working.

Collaborative working in services for children and young people

Partnership working is not a new concept (Alcock, 2010) and it is an encompassing term used to describe a range of activities and relationships, from a contractual, bureaucratic arrangement between two parties, to parties working together, perhaps in more informal arrangements, to achieve the best outcomes for the child or young person. The focus of this study is upon collaborative working, chosen in view of its relational and dialogical philosophy, described by Anderson (2007:33), as 'people creating meaning with each other and finding ways to go on'. Although 'collaboration' is conceptualised by Frost (2005) as only the second stage of four, ranging from 'cooperation', through to 'integration', it is the process of collaboration that I feel is at the crux of effective working together. As Ronny told me, 'Cross fertilization is invaluable in the current climate. Distinctions between Local Authority and so-called third sector is becoming increasingly blurred because a lot of services are being privatized – so, who is what?' What is abundantly clear is that 'finding ways to go on' is a necessary focus in times where organisations are crumbling and people are losing jobs and in acknowledging that these factors detract from the importance of placing the child or young person at the centre. As George concluded:

There are some instances where because we are dealing with children, that partnership can become difficult...that's not unusual...it can be professionally fractious but I think we need to ensure we are professional within that, so we maintain those relationships and networks and move forward toward a common goal.

Collaboration requires a mutual investment and acknowledgement of overt and covert power dynamics that exist. Cleaver et al (2008: 105) highlight that 'personal contacts' is crucial and that practitioners in their study 'reported that personal contacts enabled them to easily clarify and resolve issues.' This may be difficult in a context whereby working with others is not necessarily a choice, as in Andrew's view:

I suppose in this field, you're pushed, encouraged or erm, yeah, encouraged to do partnership work, to work in partnership with other organisations and the statutory sector...I mean, you use them...as the voluntary sector and I suppose a lot of people in the voluntary sector wouldn't admit this but they do it more for the financial advantages than anything else, if you can do something in partnership and they'll pay for that (slight laughter), do you know what I mean?

Lina also portrays a perspective about the way that services are organised, determining that partnership 'should' happen, which is less about collaboration and more about buying into the context, introduced by the previous Labour government (directed predominantly by Every Child Matters (2003) and the Children Act (2004) and still significantly influencing activity at statutory and non-statutory level). 'A lot of our referrals come from Social Services, so we have to work in partnership. We have to be really careful...we can disagree with social workers but they are the statutory service and we are not.'

This echoes the findings of Griffin and Carter (2007), who also highlight that statutory workers, such as social workers, who worked in co-location in non-statutory provision could 'stigmatise the programmes' (2007: 117) and that 'Integration of services at the strategic management level does not guarantee effective joint working at the level of service delivery.' (2007: 120).

'Stand still, go backwards' – some concluding thoughts

In the context of services for children and young people, change is inevitable and 'It has become a prerequisite for people working with children, young people and young people's services to develop a positive relationship to change; in order to be responsive to the transience that is a key feature of the work in contemporary society' (Oliver, 2010: 73). Even before the coalition government came to power and before the funding cuts and widespread restructuring and redundancy, 'practitioners [were] in a state of flux, as they await the outcomes of ongoing consultations and analysis, which determine their position, their job role and perhaps their validity within the workforce' (Oliver, 2010: 73/74). Whilst I position the non-statutory sector as the oppressed, subject to the will of the government, it is important to acknowledge the resilience of the sector. 'Stand still and you'll go backwards' is a phrase used by George in his interview and was echoed, one way or another, in all of the interviews.

Creativity is a viable currency in the current climate and it was generally conveyed in this research that the non-statutory sector practitioners have more opportunity to be creative. Louise, a Director of an Independent Fostering Provider, told me, 'In the Independent Sector... Maybe we have more freedom to be creative – I don't know if that's unfair to say.' This seemed to be an important reflection, with Amber stating, 'We're adaptable aren't we? If you think about all of the changes we've faced – going from one thing to another and so on. We've adapted and done well with each adaptation'. Sian echoed this, speaking of 'the people who cared were the ones that would try something new.' Perhaps the most creative approach was conveyed by Ronny, who appears to align himself to my notions of chameleonism (Oliver, 2010), when he gives this example:

The model we use is based on say, street sellers in West Africa. That's erm, people who hustle on the streets – selling anything in demand at a price that suits the client. It's not a written model but it is a model that sits at the back of my mind so we would never say no to anybody, or anything.

Perhaps in austere times, staying viable and staying true to professional values is about approaching change and challenge with increased responsiveness and flexibility to secure good enough outcomes for children and young people. Perhaps this position is a necessary anxiety for statutory services, who will seek surety from their partners, whilst also requiring innovative and progressive action. This is neither a combative or passive position but rather a 'responsive resistance': as Ronny asserted 'I think there should be a responsive resistance to what is going on... attempting to influence even if in a small way.'

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