Boundary Spanning: a voluntary sector perspective

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**Aim:** to explore third sector leadership practice in cross-sector contexts through the lens of theories of inter-organisational collaboration.

**Research Question:**
How do third sector leaders practice their leadership role in the context of cross-sector collaborative partnerships in children’s services?
Background

• Practice
  – Crossing sector boundaries in children’s services
  – Joint projects
  – Partnership boards
  – Working groups

• Policy context
  – Partnership (Lewis 2005)
  – Compact (Zimmeck 2010)
  – Children’s services failures and reviews (Parton 2009)
  – Big Society for children (Evans 2011)
  – Impact of austerity (NCB 2012)
  – Multiple, often short-lived, collaborative entities (e.g. Children’s Trust Boards, Early Years Partnerships)
Children in the UK

- 3.5 million children in poverty (Whitham 2012).
- Save the Children support 3,000 UK families with basic provision (Whitham 2012).
- 120,000 ‘troubled families’ cost £9 billion per year (DCLG 2013).
- 40,000 children subjects of a child protection plan (DfE 2013).
- Predicted 17% increase in the number of children living in vulnerable families between 2008 and 2015 (Reed, 2012).
- ...Maria Colwell, Victoria Climbie, Baby Peter, Hamzah Khan...
Literature: Inter-organisational Collaboration

• The potential
  – Combining resources and expertise to address complex social problems, ‘wicked issues’ (Rittel & Webber 1973), ‘messes’ (Ackoff 1974), which lie in inter-organisational domains (Trist 1983).
  – Creativity, innovation, new perspectives, shared language and systems, joined-up services (Crosby & Bryson 2005, Gray 1985, Osborne 2008, Page 2003.)

• The challenges
  – Collaborative inertia (Huxham & Vangen 2005).
Literature


• Leadership as Boundary Spanning (Williams 2002, 2013)

• Integrative Leadership (Crosby & Bryon 2005, 2010)


• ‘Collaborative thuggery’ (Vangen & Huxham 2003)
Collaborative Advantage

• achieved, when organisations together achieve something they could not achieve alone (Huxham and Vangen, 2005, Vangen and Huxham, 2010).

The ‘fundamental paradox at the heart of collaboration...The possibility for collaborative advantage rests in most cases on drawing synergy from the differences between organizations’ (Huxham & Vangen 2005 p.82).
Methodology

- Qualitative
- Multiple sources
  - Interviews
  - Observations
  - Documents
- Policy as data source
- Ethnography – similarities and differences (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007)
- (Ex-) Practitioner Research
Findings: Partnership?

‘I always think about partnership work as being on an equal footing, and actually the reality is that there isn’t, because they give us – we’re reliant on them, 70% of our funding comes from them. So, it’s not partnership in the true sense.’ (Ellie)

‘... you can raise questions, you can raise concerns, but I don’t feel that my being at that particular group or level has made a lot of difference, really. On the odd occasion, you might find that there’s something where you can challenge or get some information taken on board, but that’s pretty rare.’ (Colin)
Findings: Partnership?

‘I think we’re on the cusp between the voluntary sector being welcomed in as an equal partner...or actually having the door slammed shut in its face, saying we’ll call you when we need you, go away and wait.’ (Ian)

‘I think there’s always a risk the voluntary sector gets put in a service provision being commissioned role. I think that’s too narrow. I think we have a role, an expertise, a responsibility, to feed in to what you might call strategic thinking...It’s nothing to do with whether we end up getting any money particularly – not that we can ignore obviously, the need.’ (Eric)
Roller Coaster

‘it’s really roller-coastered over time... if I were to summarise the representation experience..., it’s just literally like that. You think you’re making progress, and then it goes like that again, and then there’s a bit of an upturn, and then it goes like that again.’

(moves her arms up and down to denote ’roller coaster’ ride) (Fiona)
High Wire

‘It does feel a bit like going on a trip-wire, going on a high wire rather, a tight-rope, with a big drop either side. As I do actually have vertigo, I think that’s a real difficulty.’ (Ian)
Insider / Outsider

‘I’m here physically every day, these are the people that I see, and I’m now being aware I suppose just that it’s a kind of undercover cop, you get the gang. At the same time, I never wanted to be the outsider, because I wanted – so anything else you have to try the shoes on, you have to sit in the skin...you’re outside inside something – it’s a weird place to be straddling. But you do hear and absorb a lot...’ (Charlotte)
‘...partnership work means me straddling different realities I suppose.’ (Eric)

‘I very often describe myself as being Janus-like, looking two ways, once towards my member [voluntary] organizations... So, we have to look to them, but also look to our principal funder which is the County Council, so there is a tension there undoubtedly. And it plays out every week, if not every day.’ (Ian)
Findings 1: Tensions as Descriptors

• **Agency** Focuses on individual’s sense of ability to make a difference in a context they understand to be dominated by public sector.

• **Values** Focuses on commitment to values rooted in voluntary sector identity, but acceptance of a more pragmatic approach to make things happen.

• **Incorporation** Focuses on maintaining independence, and a distinctive ‘voice’, whilst working within a relationship of dependence.
• Highlights challenges and risks of collaboration from voluntary sector perspective.
• Draws attention to behaviour which is both collaborative and disruptive (cf. ‘collaborative thuggery’ (Vangen & Huxham 2003).
• Experience conveyed through participant imagery: Roller coaster, tight-rope, Janus, straddling different realities, insider/outsider, undercover cop.
Findings 2: inherent tensions

• Dialogue / Confrontation (Ospina & Saz-Carranza 2010).
  – Compare with tactics of ‘collaborative disruption’
• An underlying power tension?
  – Recognition of power asymmetry
  – Need to work within public sector dominance
  – Need to assert independence, drawing on alternative sources of power.
Emergent Conclusions

• Surfacing of voluntary sector (participant) perspective in collaboration, and consequently of underlying power relationship as source of tensions.

• Significance of imagery for conveying experience of encountering and managing tensions.

• ‘Collaborative disruption’ enacted alongside the collaborative and integrative.
Implications for practice

• Messiness, ambiguity of collaboration

• Leadership as management of experienced tensions which result from tensions which are inherent in collaboration

• Leadership of participants in collaboration as both collaborative and disruptive

• Creating safe spaces for collaborative disruption

• Managing the relationship with commissioning processes
References

References (cont)


Thank you

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