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Chapter 11

Education and Social Work working collaboratively to support vulnerable families: benefits and tensions

Michael Jopling and Sharon Vincent

This chapter examines two innovative programmes aimed at improving support and provision for vulnerable families, and promoting their well-being and resilience. It focuses on the benefits, tensions and challenges associated with the inter-agency collaboration, which was central to the two programmes and, arguably, all effective support for vulnerable children, young people and families. After a brief discussion of the term “vulnerable” and inter-agency collaboration, we focus on what our research into the programmes told us about how education and social work professionals collaborate both with each other and (less commonly) with the families with whom they work, both of which are relatively unexplored areas.

Vulnerability and interagency collaboration

We have written elsewhere about the ubiquity of the use of the terms “vulnerable” and “vulnerability” to describe disadvantaged individuals, children, young people and families in social and education policy in the UK and Europe and the need to use the terms more carefully (Jopling & Vincent, 2016; 2019). Ecclestone (2016) and Ecclestone & Lewis (2014) have valuably questioned the application of the terms and their use in creating a therapeutic emphasis in social justice (Frawley, 2015) and diverting resources away from those most in need (Brown, Ecclestone & Emmel, 2017). Potter & Brotherton (2013) have similarly asserted that popular discourse has increasingly blurred the extreme positions of blame (associated broadly with neoliberalism, a political philosophy based on applying market economics and competition to all areas of society) and compensation (associated with social democratic approaches) in relation to vulnerable individuals. This has often led to “vulnerability” being emptied of meaning, allowing policy to ignore it. Informed by these arguments, our starting point is the definition of “vulnerability” used in the larger of the two programmes we draw on in this chapter: “any families with children from birth to 18 who might require some form of multi-agency support”. This also helps us to focus on the benefits and challenges involved in such collaboration, focusing on two key agencies: education and social work.

Multi-agency, or inter-agency, collaboration and partnership has been the subject of intense policy interest since the early 2000s, represented most clearly by the key New Labour policy, *Every Child Matters* (DfE, 2004). Powell and Glendinning (2002 p. 3) offered a contemporaneous, minimal definition which suggested that such partnership requires:

“the involvement of at least two agents or agencies with at least some common interests or interdependencies and [...] a relationship between them that involves a degree of trust, equality or reciprocity”.

In their slightly later review of the literature relating to inter-agency collaboration, Warmington et al. (2004, p. 7) found it to be idealised and immature, focused on promoting models of good practice and tending “to under-acknowledge interagency working as a site of tensions and contradictions”. Taylor and Thoburn (2016, p. 8) suggest that we have not moved much further and that much writing on interagency and interprofessional working still “focuses on the role and effectiveness of protocols and procedures, especially with respect to formal child protection services.”

While there is an extensive literature exploring school to school collaboration (e.g. Rincon-Gallardo & Fullan, 2016), there remains little research that has focused specifically on collaboration between teachers and social workers. However, there has been particular interest in interprofessional collaboration among researchers in Norway in recent years. Focusing on collaboration in health and social welfare, Willumsen et al (2012) concluded that it remains crucial to improve our knowledge about how best to establish and maintain high-quality services. In their study of a municipal child welfare service, Hesjedal et al (2015) identified three themes: personal commitment; creating a positive atmosphere; and pulling together towards future goals, which supported successful interprofessional collaboration, but concluded, like Willumsen et al (2012), that facilitating factors have generally been under-reported in the literature. However, these frameworks seemed inadequate as a theoretical framework for our research because their focus on *interprofessional* working underplayed the role of service users, in our case the families themselves, in the collaborations, as Willumsen et al (2012) acknowledged. Ahgren et al (2009)’s study of collaboration between professional groups represent one of the few exceptions to this. However, their framework, which distinguished between the structure, process and outcome of welfare service integration was too general for our purposes. Therefore, we decided to draw on Smith’s (2013) implicit framework to guide our analysis, because it was flexible enough to allow us to assess the extent to which families themselves were able to be involved in effective collaboration. Smith (2013) emphasised four factors:

- establishing a common sense of purpose
- mediation between different interests
- acknowledging conflict and complexity
- developing mutual trust and respect

This enabled us to put the family at the centre of our analysis as partners in, rather than barriers to, collaboration, allowing us to focus on how their well-being and resilience were improved.

Individual/group task

The research cited above only identified some of the factors involved in successful collaboration between professions. What else do you think is important in facilitating collaboration which aims to improve families’, children’s and/or young people’s well-being and resilience?

Underlying research

This chapter is based on the findings from two research projects which assessed the impact of two reform programmes, focused on improving provision and support for vulnerable families,

conducted in two areas of high deprivation in North West England between 2014 and 2017. Both projects used mixed methods which brought together qualitative research which aims to seek the view of and understand the lived experiences of participants, in our case children, young people, families and professionals, with analyses of quantitative outcome data which comprised routine numerical administrative data held by organisations such as schools, social care organisations, health services and the police. Programme A was designed by a single local authority to bring about cultural transformation through the development of an integrated, early intervention and prevention framework to promote the well-being and resilience of all vulnerable families with children from birth to 18. The programme combined new and existing initiatives, including the national “troubled families” programme (which aimed controversially to “turn around” 120,000 families regarded as both experiencing and causing serious social problems), to try to cover all such families’ needs. Programme B was smaller scale, working with ten families (initially) in a large, relatively isolated coastal town. Although the programme’s approach was based on co-production and tailored to each family’s needs, its support tended to focus on pragmatic issues such as education, mental health and emotional well-being, employment and securing benefits, alongside meeting day to day needs such as accompanying families to medical appointments. This was intended to help them become more self-reliant and improve their resilience and well-being without requiring extensive funding at a time when funding was being reduced. Both programmes were explicitly non-judgmental and regarded schools, early years settings, social services and other agencies working with families as partners in provision.

The research into Programme A involved semi-structured individual and group interviews with 83 professionals and practitioners (from schools and other agencies) and in-depth case studies of nine families involved in the programme. Programme B’s research involved semi-structured interviews with 32 professionals and practitioners (including school staff and social workers) and 20 case studies of families. The data were analysed using thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) and theory of change models specifically developed to evaluate the programmes. The findings reported in this chapter summarise some of the findings from these research projects.

Benefits and impacts

Assessment of the impact of both programmes was central to the funders of the research, both to inform their further development and to underpin applications for further funding. This meant that part of our research had to focus on assessing the extent to which various “hard” impact measures had been met. In Programme A, the local authority was focused on ambitious, transformative outcomes at the system level. In the family case studies, this included improving families’ well-being and promoting their resilience by re-engaging young people in school and improving their attendance and achievement and preventing child protection plans from being implemented and de-escalating those that were already in place. In Programme B, our analysis suggested the programme prevented at least nine children from going into care, representing an estimated saving of almost £300,000 per year; and was associated with a significant reduction of children on child protection and child in need plans. However, these and other positive outcomes were achieved in the face of a number of systemic local and national challenges, which were likely to affect the extent to which they could be sustained in the longer term. Our intention in this chapter is to explore some of the factors which affected their success, using Smith’s (2013) analysis as a theoretical framework against which to measure the extent to which improvements to families’ well-being were

mediated, or moderated, by collaboration and partnership between education and social work professionals.

Factors affecting inter-agency collaboration

Common purpose

As already stated, Programme A's ambitious objective was to support and improve the well-being of all vulnerable families in the city. This was underpinned by an ethos of inter-agency collaboration and working in partnership with families, although this was not as explicit or successful as the co-production approach adopted by Programme B, the smaller size of which made this more achievable. Some progress was made towards achieving effective collaboration between partners, notably between schools and elements of Programme A, such as the Schools Families Support Service (SFSS), which was able to extend the programme's reach in its key role *between* schools and other services. Families involved in the research felt that Programme A was more effective in providing "the right kind of support" than previous programmes in which they had been involved. This was a mix of one to one emotional support as well as practical support, delivered in their own homes and reflects Featherstone et al's (2014) identification of the value of locating "ordinary help" for families in their own communities. Family support workers often visited families daily and were well placed to undertake a monitoring role and respond to the early warning signs which are so often indicative of larger issues, such as reductions in children's attendance at school. The more holistic approach ("all families") adopted by the programme to improving families' well-being allowed professionals to make such small adjustments in vulnerable young people's lives, distinct from the depersonalized, "nudge" approach criticised by Crossley (2017). Specifically, they monitored issues such as families' mental and emotional health and well-being, relationships and dynamics within them, and the domestic environment. However, collaboration was largely limited to professionals. We found little evidence of common purpose developed or decision-making shared with families, particularly listening and giving voice to children and young people, which has been associated with improving provision for vulnerable families (Crowther & Cohen, 2011 and collaborative or co-productive approaches. This may have been the result of the time it takes to introduce such collaborative approaches, as well as prevailing, disempowering policy rhetoric (already highlighted) of "turning families around", which does not allow the time or conceptual space necessary to engage with or listen to families and, particularly, young people.

The smaller scale focus of Programme B made its strong emphasis on co-producing interventions and outcomes with families more achievable. One of the primary headteachers interviewed emphasized taking a longer term, more holistic approach to working with families in this way, rather than focusing on symptoms such as children's behavior in school:

"In education traditionally interventions have been with the child. So, the behaviour team will come in and work with the child but the parents aren't involved in that at all. Whereas this [programme] is very much about the whole family being part of that because quite often as we know the child may have a difficulty that's not actually a difficulty for the child. It's actually a family system issue and that's what they address."

She also emphasised that "It's giving them the skills, the strategies and the confidence to do that themselves. And that's not a quick fix". These types of transactional, relationship-based approaches were very different from those envisaged in the UK Government's approach to family policy in England where the policy and rhetoric shifted responsibility on to so-called

“troubled” or “anti-social” families (Hayden & Jenkins 2015). The fact that the much smaller scale Programme B was more successful in meeting its purpose of increasing families’ sense of agency and encouraging them to take more responsibility for changing their own behavior emphasises the difficulty of achieving this at scale and over time.

Individual/group task

How would you go about building consensus and purpose among colleagues you work with to improve families’ and children’s well-being and promote their resilience? What kind of things would you do initially?

Mediation

The negative emphasis of the troubled families agenda, which was the policy background to both of these programmes, inextricably in the case of Programme A, has sometimes encouraged support agencies to attempt to take control of families’ lives. However, both programmes were successful when they were able to adopt a mediating role between families and the agencies and institutions with which they were engaged. For example, in Programme A its introduction of the SFSS, which had an explicit mediatory role, played a key part in creating the neutral space that helped ensure that children remained in mainstream education and did not have to move to alternative provision in four of the nine case studies. It is often difficult for children and young people to move back into mainstream education from alternative provision, which is also much more expensive. This was important because the research also found that schools were more comfortable referring vulnerable families to other agencies than acting as “lead professional” in initiating support for them, despite the extensive training which the programme offered. They were reluctant to coordinate support for a family because they were not confident about working with specialist services such as mental health services or talking to families about non-educational problems which affect their well-being such as financial or domestic issues (Fitzgerald & Kay, 2008). Thus, mediation operated at different levels, with the SFSS mediating between schools and other services, as well as between families and a range of agencies. Furthermore, the programme’s complexity, with its multiple sub-programmes, made it difficult for many professionals to develop an understanding of it as a whole. Professionals outside education were unlikely to have heard of the SFSS and schools were not always clear what would happen when its support ended. Since school staff could be required to act as (mediating) lead professional at that point, their reluctance to develop a better understanding of the programme overall and their collaborative role in it, prevented them from being able to do this effectively. As one case study parent emphasised, schools’ reluctance to recognise there was an issue created tensions:

“I don’t want to slag the school off because it is a really great school, but I wouldn’t be confident now like going in and speaking to someone. They just think there’s nothing wrong with him and he can’t behave himself but I think there’s a little bit more to it definitely.”

The programme itself also fulfilled a mediating role in Programme B. At times this was at odds with the inflexibility of school approaches, but schools were able to accommodate themselves to this, as one of the Education Welfare Officers interviewed commented:

“Sometimes [the programme’s] agenda to support families is maybe at odds with the behaviour and discipline policy in the school, but I think because we’ve got good

working relationships with the workers, we've managed to overcome some of the more difficult obstacles you're going to get in any organisation."

Her experience was that previously schools had found it difficult to engage children from vulnerable families. While schools had made home visits, they would not have been able to develop the kind of relationship with the family necessary to reintegrate them into school. Similarly, social workers would have offered them support, but would not have worked sufficiently closely with schools to be able to promote the importance of education effectively. Again, it was often very simple mediatory things undertaken by the programme, such as reminding parents in the morning that they needed to get their children up for school or ensure they had clean clothes, that made the difference and significantly improved families' well-being. The challenge for research is to find ways to evaluate the importance of such relatively minor actions.

Acknowledging conflict and complexity

Both programmes took their complexity, and the complex lives of the families with whom they worked, as their starting point. In attempting to achieve consensus, and overcome conflict, the importance of professionals adopting the non-judgmental approach both reforms promoted was repeatedly emphasised. Such an approach is rare. Several of the families involved in Programme A felt that interactions with social workers had previously intimidated them and left them feeling powerless. Where effective relationships were developed, for example with family support workers, families felt that the relationships they developed with the workers were sufficiently robust to allow them both to challenge and support them. Their non-judgmental approach was very different from their prior experiences with social care professionals and, in many cases, came to characterise collaborative relationships between social workers and education professionals, which made a significant contribution to improving their well-being. However, when tensions arose, this was often because families were frustrated about how long it often took to receive support from the programme.

One of the care workers involved in Programme B explicitly highlighted the importance of the programme's neutrality: "It's about looking from the outside-in and being able to give that advice in a non-judgmental way." Focusing on building relationships in order to understand where families were and how to work with them to improve their situation had enabled professionals, from both social services and education, to develop high levels of trust very quickly, as the following section underlines. One of the Education Welfare Officers emphasised that she felt that the concentrated nature of the programme allowed professionals from different areas to join together to offer support consistently in a way that prevented conflict from escalating:

"In this case [the programme] was able to pull together a raft of other professionals to support the family members. So, Mum got support with her health, Dad got support with his addiction and also his mental health. [...] It was a joined-up approach over an extended period of time. And that's what made the difference."

Respecting families and gaining their trust was key to this and much more difficult to achieve in Programme A.

Trust

The importance, and difficulty, of establishing and maintaining trust between professionals and families, as well as among professionals themselves, was a key factor affecting the programmes' effectiveness. Due to lack of space, we use issues surrounding communication as proxy indicators of how trust functioned in different ways in the programmes. The complexity and size of programme A meant that communication issues consistently created tension. Families found it difficult to find out what services were available in their area, despite the creation of a new services directory. While there was evidence of improved understanding among professionals of what services other agencies offered and cross-agency meetings to combine expertise and coordinate services around a family became more common, this did not automatically lead to trust or cohesion (Featherstone et al. 2014). Consistency was an issue as professionals in all the agencies involved were concerned that reducing budgets resulted in thresholds for services being raised, therefore excluding families from support and affecting families' trust in the support on offer.

The smaller size of Programme B made it easier for professionals involved to meet families' needs and expectations consistently: "They don't overpromise, they don't under-deliver. If they say something's going to happen, it does happen" (Education Welfare Officer). One of the headteachers interviewed emphasised the importance of having a single social worker communicating with and coordinating all support for the family, rather than being repeatedly moved between professionals with whom they had to start from scratch. This enabled the social worker to develop a trusting relationship that was deep enough to enable them to identify support that anticipated, rather than merely met, families' articulated needs: "They had to try to find a way in to give them the support they needed that they didn't actually say they wanted. They were very good at that". This allowed professionals in the programme to build trust at different levels, including among professionals, as one special educational needs coordinator commented: "I've felt much more that I trust services that are working to support young people. I haven't always felt that in the past." As a result, different agencies were able to work closely together in ways that were not always apparent in the much larger Programme A. Again, this highlights the fact that, although applicable to small scale interventions in a range of contexts, it is difficult to sustain these kinds of approaches, especially at scale, because they depend so much on professionals being trained and prepared to build the kind of consistent and trusting relationships with vulnerable children and their families that are so crucial to improving their well-being and resilience.

Individual/group task

As we have emphasised, building trust among professionals and families is much easier said than done. How do we go about developing and maintaining trust with vulnerable families and individuals?

Conclusion: Implications for improving vulnerable families' well-being and resilience

Although the capabilities-based approaches adopted (to different degrees) by the two programmes we have explored can be difficult to evaluate, both in terms of their impact and the values on which they are based (Ecclestone & Lewis 2014), it appeared that they allowed professionals to develop an understanding of where families were and used that knowledge to build strong relationships with them. Alongside the agencies' mediating role, this allowed the programmes to increase families' confidence in many cases, the benefits of which are

likely to have been longer term improvements in their well-being and resilience to cope with the challenges they continued to face. The short term nature of the research that is undertaken into such interventions makes it impossible to make more than a tentative claim for this. However, it is also clear from the research that, as Warmington et al. (2004) highlighted, tensions are an inevitable part of interagency working, including between education and social work, and this needs to be anticipated and built into its implementation and evaluation.

It is also important to emphasise in conclusion the limitations that continue to characterise interagency collaboration. Despite their emphasis on co-production and close partnership with families, both programmes struggled to achieve the “co-configuration” (Warmington et al. 2004: 4) in which “ongoing customisation of services is achieved through dynamic, reciprocal relationships between providers and clients”. The failure to move forward in allowing families, including children and young people, to have a voice in their own support (Tucker et al. 2015) may be a consequence of the rhetoric of blame that has blighted policies such as the troubled families programme, although “co-production” (as co-configuration tends now to be termed) remains much more common in adult social care services than in children’s services, despite advances in many areas. In particular, young people are rarely listened to or involved in decisions about support that is designed to improve their well-being and promote resilience. Doing so may in itself have a positive effect on their well-being. This suggests that interagency collaboration needs to focus on the importance of developing a deeper understanding of the “empirical realities” of the children and young people they work with, particularly in schools which are increasingly being required to take on more responsibility for vulnerable children and young people in the face of enduring budget reductions. The success of interventions like the SFSS in Programme A, which facilitated better joint working between social work and schools, indicates the value of reconfiguring professional roles and services to promote mediation and collaboration which involves, as well as supports, vulnerable families and promotes their well-being and resilience.

Summary points

- Supporting families and children’s well-being and promoting their resilience is complex, affected by multiple independent factors, and requires multi-agency collaboration, such as between education and social work, to mediate between services and build trust.
- Effective multi-agency collaboration still rarely involves families or young people as partners, despite the emphasis placed on approaches which are co-produced or co-configured. In particular, young people are rarely listened to, which itself has negative effects on their well-being and resilience.
- Deficit perceptions of vulnerable families continue to have a negative effect on vulnerable children’s and families’ well-being and resilience and support structures and systems are still too often influenced by such attitudes.

Recommended reading

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