

Only connect

Using a critical incident tool to
develop multi-agency collaboration
in two children's centres

SCHOOL LEADERS

Report

Alison Cummings

Policy & Practice Development, Sure Start & Extended
Services, East Riding of Yorkshire

Introduction

Assessing and then improving the effectiveness of collaborative working is an essential task for leaders of new and amalgamating multi-agency teams offering integrated services to children and families.

This research describes the approaches two children's centre leaders adopted in running whole centre development days and the respective benefits and learning points from each.

The main aim was to apply a case study enquiry to find out whether a critical incident tool (Anning 2005), adapted for use within a whole team development day, would stimulate more collaboration between teams over a three month time period, with a focus on jointly-owned action planning.

The two centres chosen as case studies were at very different stages of development, with contrasting histories and experiences of leadership. This study attempts to contribute to the limited evidence base in this area, by analysing in detail the outcomes that followed a period of developmental work in the two centres.

Approach

My approach as consultant/researcher with both centres was the same.

- Phone interview, questionnaire and face-to-face discussions held with the centre leaders.
- Jointly plan and facilitate a development/visioning day using the critical incident tool with all staff.
- Return visit a week later to review learning and action planning from the day and collect written feedback from staff, with analysis from leadership team.
- Jointly assess outcomes at bi-monthly follow-up visit to each setting to review progress and achievements.

The action research process took place over five months in each centre, using the centres as case studies to examine whether whole team use of the critical incident tool could improve the effectiveness of multi-agency collaboration. During this time, the review sessions provided the opportunity to discuss potential applications from research, for instance the use of journaling as a means of reflection, and ongoing consideration and review of leadership strategies.

Findings

"This is where the day helped: we were dealing with all these issues relating to people from other agencies. We didn't realise that we were dealing with each other like that."

(staff member)

Researcher's reflections

- It is not surprising that issues arising in collaborative practice such as trust, communication and language, accountability, resources and common aims (Coleman 2006) are as important to resolve internally in a multi-agency team as between the team and its outside partners. There can be a tendency in teams to see difficulties in creating partnerships originating from other agencies, rather than a reflection of the areas that are currently problematic within the team.
- An observation from these case studies was that there was a direct relationship between the leadership qualities that were demonstrated by the leaders and the move towards more integrated and value-based practice that occurred in the centres after the development day. This is summarised in table 1.

Table 1. Leadership qualities and staff practice

Leadership qualities demonstrated	Evidence of changing practice by staff
Commitment and visibility	Move to open plan office, better timekeeping, opening the centre after hours for parents
Recognition and acting on staff concerns	Less indication that staff were planning to leave
	Greater willingness to listen to parents' views
Giving value based reasons for contentious decisions	Greater willingness to explain difficult situations to parents
Constructive approach to conflict	Staff more openly voicing their opinions in meetings
Providing development opportunities	Staff volunteering for training and cascading practice development

The results revealed from the two case studies show that the thoughtful use of critical incident techniques by leaders within the context of a single staff development day had far reaching effects.

- It offered staff an opportunity to find out about and question each other's practice with children and families. This led to increased confidence in articulating the values underpinning their work.
- It enabled team leaders to see discrepancies and gaps in knowledge and skills, and develop appropriate training amongst their teams.
- It helped staff themselves to identify ways of working closer together and sharing resources.
- It stimulated joint action planning from staff.

- It resulted in more representative management and governance structures and pooled capital funding (Centre A).
- It led to marked improvements in responses to parents' concerns and better staff morale and increased staff confidence (Centre B).

Conclusion

"So valuable to have this time to step back and think about things. We're such 'doing' people – we just get on with everything. You're helping us get a different, better view on what we're doing." (centre leader)

The centre leaders reported that work on building shared values and a common language to translate these values to parents was a useful, timely intervention for their centre teams. They found the focus on staff responses to the problematic situations in the scenarios represented a useful diagnostic and action planning tool which promoted increased understanding amongst multi-agency teams of each other's beliefs, practices and the need to improve joined up working.

The progress in both centres in implementing action plans drawn up after the development/visioning day was remarkable. Not only had most of the changes requested by staff been achieved, but the day had triggered a latent will in both centres to improve centre integration, which found expression in some unexpected ways. In Centre A there was renewed energy to find more representative and inclusive governance arrangements and a new urgency to securing funding for the landscaping of the grounds. In Centre B there was a direct impact on parents' involvement and presence in the building, and many changes affecting parents that the new manager had identified but staff had resisted, had become possible.

Key factors for collaboration

Reviewing their learning with centre leaders after the development days in each centre highlighted the following key factors in building effective multi-agency collaboration.

- Prioritising time for jointly developing reflective practice.
- Understanding the importance of team history.
- Understanding cultural and practice differences.
- Involving staff in the process as equals.
- Sharing power and information.
- Modelling collaborative and value-based practice.
- Clearly articulating the centre's vision and ethos to staff and parents.

All seven themes are closely linked to the values, skills and attitudes the groups of multi agency staff considered most likely to produce effective outcomes for children and families in each scenario in the critical incident tool.

It is hoped that this research may provide encouragement and help to new, emergent and established centre leaders stepping over the threshold of new integrated children's centres. These leaders embark on the triple challenge of forging a multi-agency team, building a shared value base and supporting individual staff members in providing a responsive, respectful and empowering service to children, parents and families. Jointly constructing and then sustaining in a multi-agency context, a shared and coherent set of underpinning values for this practice is an essential first step on the journey.

References

Anning, A, 2005, *Investigating the impact of working in multi-agency service delivery settings in the UK on early years practitioners' beliefs and practices*. Journal of Early Childhood Research, 3:1, 19-50

Coleman, A, 2006, *Collaborative Leadership in Extended Schools*. NCSL, Nottingham

Acknowledgements

My thanks go to all those whose support made this research possible, most notably the Centre Leaders themselves, Angela Annings and my tutors at Penn Green and NCSL.

Research associate reports available in autumn 2008

■ **Healthy body: healthy mind**

How headteachers are managing their schools to help improve children's health

Barry Dawson, *Former headteacher, Bidston Avenue Primary School, Wirral*

Colleen Taylor, *Headteacher, Broadoak Primary School, Salford*

Gordon Scholefield, *Former headteacher, Brookdale Primary School, Wirral*

Marie Egerton-Jones, *Headteacher, Leamington Primary School, Liverpool*

■ **Can federations help stars to come out?**

Exploring the unique contribution of federations to the development of school leaders

George Ford and Elaine McCue, *Dual Headteachers, Federation of Abbey Schools, Darlington*

■ **Parents matter**

How can leaders involve parents in the self-evaluation process and further development of children's centre and extended school services?

Liz Klavins, *Head of Centre, Fairfield Children's Centre*

■ **Teachers into leaders: networking and leadership development**

Growing leaders of the future is becoming an accepted central responsibility of leaders of the present

Yvonne Lawrence, *Former Headteacher, Horsell Church of England Junior School*

Debbie Robins, *Headteacher, Wray Common Primary School*

Bob Twells, *Headteacher, Furzefield Primary School*

■ **Student Leadership and School Improvement**

How can school leaders involve students in the school improvement process through developing students as researchers?

Jean Watt, *School Improvement Officer, Education Bradford*

Research Associate Programme

Published: September 2008

To download this publication, please visit
www.ncsl.org.uk/publications

We welcome enquiries about the Research Associate programme. For further information about:

- current projects
- previously published reports
- becoming a research associate

Please visit the website:
www.ncsl.org.uk/researchassociates

**National College for
School Leadership**
Triumph Road
Nottingham NG8 1DH

T: 0845 609 0009
F: 0115 872 2001
E: enquiries@ncsl.org.uk
W: www.ncsl.org.uk

Disclaimer

In publishing Research Associate reports, NCSL is offering a voice to practitioner leaders to communicate with their colleagues. Individual reports reflect personal views based on evidence-based research and as such are not statements of NCSL policy.