Developing multi-agency teams: implications of a national programme evaluation

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Abstract
This paper explores the factors which influence the effectiveness of formal development programmes targeted at multi-agency teams in children’s services. It draws on two studies of the National College for School Leadership’s Multi-Agency Teams Development programme, reporting key characteristics of the programme, short-term outcomes in terms of learning and longer-term outcomes in relation to team performance and the factors that seemed to influence programme success. Locating the programme initially in relation to concepts of teams and team learning which implicitly underpin work in this area, it concludes that in current multi-agency contexts the conditions necessary for developing ‘true’ teams often do not exist and therefore development programmes need to take account of the specific contexts within which inter-agency work takes place.

Keywords
teams, networks, multi-agency, leadership development, National College for School Leadership

Introduction
Major changes have taken place in the delivery of children’s services in England and in the other countries of the UK over the last decade. The Every Child Matters (ECM) agenda (DfES, 2004), which increasingly informed a range of relevant policies of the previous Labour government (e.g. DoH, 2009; DCSF, 2010), asserted multi-professional working as the predominant method for the delivery of children’s services. Although the position of the new Conservative/Liberal Democrat administration elected in 2010 is more ambiguous, collaborative working among agencies and professions will doubtless continue as a significant instance of the wider trend for governments to use partnerships as a mechanism for the delivery of public services and, in particular, to address issues of social inclusion. The problematic nature of partnership working, such as sharing power, building trust and reconciling conflicting perspectives, is well documented (Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Huxham & Hibbert, 2006; Anning et al., 2006; Edwards et al., 2009). Such issues have substantial implications for children’s services professionals in the front-line and at the strategic level who have to contend not only with the inherent difficulties of effective partnership working, but do so in a context of ongoing change in the configuration of services. Providing effective support for multi-professional working in these contexts poses particular challenges, both in the design of development programmes and in the ways in which participants are engaged and training is organised. The aim of this paper is to explore the degree to which ‘team development’ programmes are the best response to such challenges. It draws on two studies of the National College for School Leadership’s (hereafter called the National College) Multi-Agency Teams Development (MATD) programme.

The paper begins by placing the concept of multi-agency teams within the context of both the literature on teams and their role in multi-agency and partnership working. It then briefly describes the MATD programme, its purposes and the details of our study methods, before reporting key findings of the two studies. These findings lead to a wider discussion of the possibilities for effective team development in multi-agency contexts.

Multi-agency teams and their development
The literature on partnership, collaboration and multi-professional/agency working is complex and terminology is often used loosely and inconsistently (Powell & Exworthy, 2002). For the purposes of this paper we wish to distinguish between relationships among organisations and those among individuals working within them. Partnership we define in terms of the former: the coming together of organisations or agencies to pursue shared problems or, possibly, common goals. Partnership, then,
is embodied in, among other things, the relationships that are developed among individuals within these inter-agency contexts. Teams are one way in which such relationships may manifest themselves.

‘Team’ is a concept that is used widely and loosely in relation to a wide range of contexts in which people work together. Nevertheless there is a good deal of commonality among many definitions of what a team is, with authors typically identifying four key features: shared goals or objectives, interdependence between members, mutual accountability and, hence, the need for work to be coordinated (Larson & LaFasto, 1989; Katzenbach & Smith 1993; Salas et al., 2005). The literature on team effectiveness is very large and reflects a variety of disciplinary perspectives. A multitude of variables that are claimed to influence team effectiveness has been identified and these have been classified in a range of ways (see, for example, Mathieu et al., 2008, for a review). For example, Salas et al. (2005) suggest a ‘big five’ of effective leadership, mutual performance monitoring, backup behaviour, adaptability and team orientation among members, all underpinned by three key coordinating mechanisms, namely shared mental models, closed loop communication and mutual trust.

Nevertheless, much of the literature on teams either assumes that they exist within a formal organisational structure or researches them in that context (e.g. Zaccaro et al., 2001; Kogler Hill, 2007). For example, Yukl (2010: ch. 12) distinguishes between functional teams (for example a departmental team), cross-functional teams established explicitly to address issues that cross internal organisational boundaries (for example, a coordination team or a project team), self-managing operating teams and top executive teams. The territory of multi-agency teams is much wider and more ambiguous, presenting a much greater variety of possibilities for professionals to work together in contexts where team working may be necessary but much more difficult to achieve.

Inter-agency contexts can vary widely. As Dyson et al. (2009) note, ‘each of [many] organisational forms is a site for collaboration, yet the legal status, governance, resourcing and working practice of each is different’ (p. 143). Frost (2005), in his work on child welfare, suggests four levels of organisational partnership, ranging from no coordination, through cooperation and collaboration to full integration. Ovretveit (1993), similarly, suggests five team types. These range from the fully managed team with the team manager or leader accountable for all the team’s work and for the performance of all team members to the much loose network association. The latter is not really a formal team but simply involves professionals who work with common client groups meeting together on a ‘need to share’ basis. Anning et al. (2006: 46), in their study of integrated children’s services, draw on Ovretveit’s work to explore the structures of their five case study teams. The picture is one of great complexity, but they suggest some basic requirements for multi-professional teams to be able to function. These include: absolute clarity on team aims and objectives and individual responsibilities; clear line management and coordination arrangements; appropriate support for personal and professional development; and formal structures for liaison with other agencies. Many so-called ‘teams’ are likely to find it hard to meet such demanding criteria.

The Multi-Agency Team Development programme

A number of writers (e.g. Cameron & Lart, 2003; Hornby, 2003) have identified joint post-qualification education and training as a key engine of more effective joined up collaborative practice. Such training may include: activities to address individual issues such as self-awareness, stress management and assertiveness; activities designed to develop familiarity with other team members’ tasks; and team-building work focusing on ‘role clarification, goal setting, problem solving or inter-personal relations’ (Day et al., 2004: 868). Edwards et al. (2009: ch. 4) identify a number of shared concepts that professionals need to develop, such as ‘focusing on the whole child in the wider context’ and ‘developing processes for knowledge sharing’ which facilitate the shared remodelling of practices. However, it is also suggested that certain preconditions may be necessary for such training to be effective. For example, Kelly & Hill (1994) maintain that joint training does not work effectively unless preceded by joint working arrangements, while Edmundson (1999) suggests that psychological safety and team efficacy are important preconditions for effective team learning. Barr (2003) argues that the key components of inter-professional education should be the application of principles of adult learning to interactive, group-based learning. In other words, there need to be clear links between collaborative learning and collaborative practice.

These ideas were embodied in the design of MATD which was established by the National College in order to enable participants to develop team-working skills and behaviours so they can address the challenges of delivering the outcomes resulting from the ECM agenda. The programme develops effective teamwork that crosses agency boundaries to deliver improved working environments and better outcomes for children, young people, families and those working with them. (National College website)

Teams were typically recruited to the programme through local authorities (LAs) which had to provide a sponsor – normally a senior leader in the LA – who had overall responsibility for the team’s engagement with the programme. Teams were expected to comprise 8–10 members, although this was not achieved in all cases. The programme experience comprised an initial briefing event and four (five in the pilot) face-to-face events over a period of six months, one of which was residential. The events, which had a strongly experiential flavour, explored issues relating to effective team working in multi-agency contexts and included activities designed to build the team and, where a number of teams underwent the experience
together, to enable teams to learn from each other. Activities included diagnostics to explore personal and team characteristics and their implications for team working, workshop activities of various kinds and the use of theatre to explore multi-agency scenarios. A key aspect of the programme was that each team undertook a project that was designed both to progress a real multi-agency issue for which the team had responsibility and contributed to team development and learning. The team reported on this experience at the final event.

A pilot of MATD, involving 20 teams, took place during 2005–6. The programme was then rolled out from 2008. Recruitment to the roll-out was slower than anticipated with 22 teams from six LAs (including 17 from three LAs) commencing the programme in its first year.

The studies

This paper draws on two studies undertaken on behalf of the National College during 2008/9 to help inform the development of the MATD programme. The specific purpose of the first study (the ‘pilot study’) was to follow-up teams which had undertaken the pilot in order to explore the longer-term impact of the programme on the work of the teams and the agencies involved. Four pilot teams (Teams A, B, C and D) were identified that appeared to offer interesting possibilities for follow-up case studies and that were willing to participate in the study. In three of these cases data was obtained through focus groups with team members, supplemented in some cases by telephone or face-to-face interviews. In the fourth case it did not prove possible to organise a focus group and a number of structured telephone interviews were undertaken instead.

Our second study (the ‘roll-out study’) was an evaluation of the MATD roll-out. The three case studies of roll-out teams (Teams E, F and G) comprised telephone interviews with sponsors, programme facilitators and providers at the beginning and end of the programme and an impact workshop with the team shortly after the last programme event. The workshop involved a variety of group activities designed to elicit participants’ views on the experience of the programme and its immediate outcomes. The outcomes of these activities were used, together with detailed notes of the structured telephone interviews and focus groups from both studies, to produce accounts of each team’s experience and develop a thematic analysis with particular emphasis on short- and longer-term outcomes and the factors that influenced these.

Of the seven case study teams, Teams A and C were centred on schools and team D on a children’s centre, with the remaining teams having a geographical focus around a sub-locality of a local authority. Three of the teams existed prior to the MATD programme, two were created to take advantage of the development opportunity that it provided, and two were extended when they engaged with the programme.

Programme outcomes

Short-term outcomes

Our respondents’ responses concerning the immediate value of the MATD experience were generally positive. They reported personal learning in relation both to themselves and to the team as a whole. Perhaps most significant, many respondents affirmed the value of the programme in increasing understanding across boundaries between agencies in terms of their perspectives and the pressures they work under. This reduced suspicion – even antagonism – and provided the basis for more effective cross-agency working. The development of shared understanding is a particular challenge for teams which comprise individuals from a range of professions whose values and assumptions may differ considerably (Dyson et al., 2009; Close & Wainwright, 2010). The achievement of such outcomes on the MATD programme seemed to be related to a number of factors in the programme, including the use of team diagnostic tools, the time devoted to working together on experiential activities and, particularly, the project.

However, these generally positive responses to the programme need to be treated with caution. In the workshops we undertook with them we asked our roll-out teams whether they felt they really were teams at the end of the programme. Two of the three teams expressed doubts about whether they were genuinely a team or merely a group that had learned to work together more effectively as a result of the programme. The MATD programme manager for Team E expressed this well: ‘They are a working group which is much looser … a multi-agency working group’. The issue here was that the team shared responsibilities to deliver multi-agency services in a geographical area, but they were not part of the LA’s organisational structure. The perspective from Team F was rather different. Here, the team leader felt that, with the first stage of the project completed, ‘largely the work of the team is done’. He saw that the MATD team had been ‘an initiator’ and success would now lie in all services working together more broadly. In other words, the MATD team was seen as a project team rather than a permanent part of the organisational structure. Of the roll-out teams, only Team G seemed clear that they were a team at the end. They saw themselves as having a well defined place within the LA’s structures and team members were well aware of the expectation that their work together would continue in various forms at the end of MATD.

Longer-term outcomes

The issues that emerged at the end of the programme for our roll-out teams, especially in relation to how far the programme genuinely facilitated the creation or development of teams, were echoed in the data we gathered from the four pilot teams two years after their completion of the programme. Two of the pilot teams (A and B) undertook projects that were concerned with embedding multi-agency work in their locality and two (C and D) undertook more specific projects, one to locate a social worker in one of the schools and the other to develop a community allotment.
Our study suggested that, while there was considerable evidence from all these teams of positive short-term outcomes in terms of both learning and the development of better understanding and positive relationships across agency boundaries, viewed over the longer term the picture becomes much more mixed. The experience of Teams B and D was generally positive. For Team B the MATD programme appeared to support an ongoing process of team evolution, while Team D was effectively embedded within the LA structure and, beyond that, the implementation of the community allotment had both proved a valuable vehicle for learning and contributed significantly to the progress of the multi-agency agenda in the area. In contrast, both Teams A and C were disbanded as a result of reorganisation within the local authority, so much of the learning from the MATD programme was dissipated.

Factors influencing programme success

We identified a number of factors that influenced both short- and longer-term outcomes. These were generally consistent with previous findings about factors affecting team performance, but the specific multi-agency context of these teams gives them a particular flavour.

First, team selection was a key issue. In their work on team leadership, Morgeson et al. (2010) note the role of the leader in determining team composition, ensuring that it is aligned with the task environment, provides the required knowledge and skills and forms the basis for trusted and cooperative relationships. However, much of the discussion of team composition in the literature focuses on personal characteristics of team members, such as personality and competence (e.g. Mathieu et al., 2008), whereas our study indicated the importance of organisational factors in team selection. Thus, while selection generally reflected the structure of a particular LA – and structures varied considerably – there was some evidence that teams were better placed to benefit from MATD if there was a clear strategic rationale for the selection of participants. Careful consideration needed to be given, not just to which agencies would be represented, but also to the relative seniority of proposed team members and their working relationships with others in the team. Most significantly here teams needed ‘the space and autonomy to move something forward’, as one facilitator put it.

Second, while MATD teams did not have to be well-established prior to their engagement with the programme, it helped. The need to relate processes of team development to the stage that a team has reached has been noted by a number of writers, with a particular distinction made between stages where the team is establishing its assumptions and ways of working and those where it is focusing on task accomplishment (Marks et al., 2001; Day et al., 2004; Salas et al., 2005). If the MATD teams were not well established, there needed to be a shared sense of purpose, at least at team leadership level, around which engagement in MATD activities could be focused, with a clear vision concerning how members of the team would work together in the longer run and, therefore, how benefits from participation in MATD were likely to be sustained. Indeed, although teams might differ structurally, a strong sense of ownership of the multi-agency agenda at the level of the team seemed to be a key ingredient for success in teams such as B and D. This could be compromised if it came into tension with centralised agendas and plans. Similarly, projects were more likely to be successful if they were underpinned by a shared philosophy of working towards outcomes for client groups and embedding enhanced working practices in the team.

Third, team leadership was important. This is a factor that appears in most lists of key variables influencing team performance and is a subject of a wide literature in its own right (Zaccaro et al., 2001; Day et al., 2004; Kogler Hill, 2007; Morgeson et al., 2010). As already noted, much literature on teams assumes that the leadership of teams is formal. However, this is increasingly being challenged, with some writers arguing that non-traditional leadership and, indeed, leaderless teams are becoming of increasing significance (Morgeson et al., 2010; Day et al., 2004). While not denying these possibilities, our findings suggest that in multi-agency contexts the allocation of a leadership role to a particular individual who has the skills and perceived legitimacy to carry it out seems to enhance the likelihood that process-based team development programmes will be successful. However, this leader did not need to be – indeed, often could not be – the line manager of all team members. Among the roll-out teams, Teams F and G had team leaders with clearly defined and recognised roles who were clearly well-respected by the team. They facilitated and administrated but also provided some direction and pace. In contrast, the work of Team E was coordinated by someone who was line managed by the sponsor but was not seen as a team leader, rather as a co-ordinator. This may have contributed to the time that Team E took to develop a suitable project and the feeling at the end of the programme that a team still did not really exist.

Our analysis of the four pilot teams illuminates wider issues that affect the longer-term impact of MATD. While all four teams experienced positive short-term outcomes in terms of individual and team learning which would seem to reflect the quality of the MATD provision, the size, nature and robustness of the longer-term outcomes varied. The reasons for this lie in factors associated with the context within which the teams were formed and their work continued (or not) after MATD.

The first point to note is that all the teams had a genuine sense of ownership of the MATD experience and of the projects that they undertook on the programme. Team C’s project, to place a social worker in a school, although an LA-initiated pilot, was genuinely created by the team at the local level. As a result, the schools and the social worker developed shared purposes and ways of working that significantly enhanced provision for pupils in the schools. Team D’s community allotment emerged from the team’s participation in MATD and became genuinely embedded in the practice of the community. For Teams A and B there was a strong commitment to multi-agency working that was embodied in their projects which were
essentially concerned with the further development of their teams.

Secondly, procedural factors appeared to be supportive of multi-agency working for Teams B and D which were more successful in the longer term. The children’s centre team (Team B) was co-located in a spacious, refurbished building and they seemed to have set up working processes very quickly prior to MATD. For team D, although the team described themselves as a virtual team and team members were not co-located, they came together as a team at regular three-weekly intervals to hold a panel meeting which had developed effective shared procedures.

Thirdly, effective longer term outcomes depended, of course, on whether the team actually continued to exist in the longer run. This in turn depended on a degree of stability in the organisational structure within which they were located. Both Teams B and D were located within stable organisational structures that provided a supportive framework for multi-agency team working. For Team B this was provided by the children’s centre; for Team D the panel organisation was also supportive of multi-agency working, providing a clear and well-established structure for joined-up services within the locality. In contrast, Teams A and C were both disbanded as a result of local authority reorganisation. This meant that the short-term outcomes in terms of team learning and development could not be sustained.

A final factor was the presence of ‘champions’ who could lead developments which built on MATD and acted as advocates of values and decisions necessary to carry the work forward. Morgeson et al. (2010) distinguish between ‘champions’ who are internal to teams and ‘sponsors’ who are external and represent the team within the wider organisation and beyond. We found examples of both of these roles. For example, in Team B strong and committed leadership at both strategic and operational levels appears to have been a factor shaping positive outcomes for this team. The team leader described the strategic leader who had been instrumental in the development of the multi-agency panel as ‘inspirational’. In Team A, too, the officer sponsoring the MATD team was instrumental in negotiating participation across a number of agencies, and the two head teachers were critical in energetically carrying forward the commitment and philosophy developed during MATD while their original team dissolved around them.

Our study confirms these challenges, but we would make a further point in the context of multi-agency working. There are potential pitfalls in thinking about the ways in which professionals work together in such contexts simply through the ‘teams’ lens. We have already noted that the concept of ‘multi-agency teams’ is a complex one (Ovretveit, 1993; Frost, 2005; Anning et al., 2006; Dyson et al., 2009). Interlocking groups of professionals working together across boundaries in a variety of patterns is a more likely scenario in many situations than that of tightly structured teams with common purposes, shared line management and common working arrangements. Histories, composition and development trajectories are likely to continue to vary markedly in different contexts. It is clear from our small sample of ‘teams’ recruited for MATD that not all were teams in the sense we described earlier and even those that were differed in quite fundamental respects.

The experience of some of our teams confirmed the findings about team effectiveness that appear elsewhere in the literature. For these teams, genuine teamwork was facilitated by a clear strategic rationale and structural location, a designated and skilful leader and well-developed and shared working practices. Where this was the case, the MATD programme interventions were able both to enhance mutual understanding and help develop a shared sense of purpose and shared processes – key characteristics of successful teams.

However, not all our cases fitted this scenario, suggesting that the development of multi-agency ‘teams’ has to be considered in relation to the broader political and structural context within which they are located. For example, some teams were created by their organisations specifically to take advantage of the MATD programme – in which case they were at best short-term project teams – while the structural rationale for others was ambiguous or fragile. In such cases there were still positive outcomes from the programme. In particular, where the majority of members continued to have working relationships within a local multi-agency context, the potential contribution in terms of enhanced understanding of others’ roles and, even at the most basic level, enhanced personal relationships between individuals, was likely to be valuable. What could not be developed was genuine team effectiveness in the longer term. The least propitious situation was where, as a result of local authority restructuring, most members of the team did not continue to work together at all. In these cases the best that could be expected was for individual learning to be transferred to other contexts, for example in leading new groups which were established as a result of the restructuring.

These conclusions lead to two implications for programmes such as MATD. First, they suggest that such programmes can be of value, especially if appropriate conditions are created in relation to issues such as team selection and leadership and if the programme is well-designed and effectively delivered. Where the circumstances are right, short-term outcomes in terms of individual learning and improved understanding and relationships can be achieved. Secondly, however, longer-term outcomes – especially the translation of individual and group learning into group effectiveness and organisational impact – depend,
in addition, on the organisational context in which participants work. Poorly designed organisational structures, lack of strategic support and instability limit the likely impact of development programmes in the longer term. The design of development programmes, therefore, needs to take account of such considerations so that programmes whose central purpose is to develop teams should be reserved for those circumstances where such teams exist and where the broader organisational context suggests that they will continue to exist in the longer term.

Notes
1. However, the views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the National College.
2. The National College undertook a review of the MATD in the light of these findings. However, the programme closed at the end of March 2011.

References

**Biography**

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