

Geoff Bateson's input
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Background

- I started my career teaching science in a large urban secondary school, breaking off for two years working in a small rural community in Kenya. I recognised that my interests lay in community development, youth work, adult learning ... Went through series of career changes but, throughout all the various roles, the consistent feature has been a need to work in all sorts of partnership arrangements.

Some of these were very local ways of working with members of communities; some involved partnerships (coalitions) of workers in a neighbourhood; some were quite formal city-level partnerships trying to bring about large scale structural change (linking very effectively with the new labour government ... finding new ways forward).

Most of these partnership ways of operating have been about education ... skills ... learning ... change/development in communities ... improving things for children, young people and families on the ground. Most recently the work has had a focus on literacy, language, numeracy; and has broadened to take in puzzles such as:

- What to do to give young people aged 13-25 better ways forward?
- What to do for adults who don't speak English; who are disconnected from wider processes; who aren't making best use of health/welfare services?
- What can be done to lift more children out of poverty (given what we know about adult/child intergenerational influences)?
- How can national shifts in policy get put in place locally in ways that are most helpful to the least wealthy communities of people?

All of my recent sets of partnership working have involved elements of plans, strategies, and policies. All have required working through 'influence' rather than direct management (usually influencing key decision-makers who have their own views of the world). All have involved questions about how people need to behave if any system is to get the best use of any resources available. Whilst involved in longer-term change to systems, all have (at the same time) demanded quick answers to questions like 'What can be done to make a difference tomorrow (If not today)? What kind of evidence can we use to base our decisions on?'

- So – 30 years of working collaboratively in different ways has enabled me to explore of some of the thinking behind what I have experienced. I know that language and ideas don't necessarily neatly translate from one setting to another (across structures; across cultures) but I'm sure there is something here for everyone – let's see:

I'm always fascinated by the use of the English language – so rich in meanings and subtleties. Language is so important: I spent a drawn out doctorate spent looking at how groups of people used the same language to mean quite different things around the whole idea of 'community'. There are so many settings where words can be stretched to cover a whole range of varied meanings. For example: Whenever we mention 'partnerships' there are various interpretations of things under that label.

- There is the 'need to have a partnership to get the grant' – At best this is a set of people working well together to the same agenda; at worst it is partnership as simply a list of others who can be tagged onto your project application and forgotten once the money has been secured
- There is the coalition – a loose grouping around a specific public/social concern. At best this will allow a group of enthusiasts to be dynamic/focused. At worst it will be set of weird individualists who are able to agree only on one thing ...
- Or 'partnerships' can focus on the formal structure – At best this can bring some useful rigour/formality to the process – people being clear about remits, decisions. At worst people can be overly concerned about terms of reference, remit of the group; membership of the partnership; schedule of meetings; logo etc. and never really get on with the main purpose of bringing about changes in how things work for people.
- More locally it can be sets of workers struggling to find the best solutions to people's issues – e.g. a teacher, health visitor, child development worker meeting in a professional discussion focused on better outcomes for people
- And as parents, there can be the whole area of what it means to work in partnership with a child's school or hospital – and the issues of whose needs are being discussed (the organisation's? the child's? the parent's?). There is a need to get the right balance. Parents of children with learning difficulties often go through their own journey as they work out in practice what 'partnership with the school' is all about: a parent may initially go in to hear what the experts have to offer; then may start to go in to argue that things aren't good enough; then to negotiate a 'good enough' plan; and may end up going in simply as the voice of their child, regarding the child as the one who really understands what is needed.

All these various ways of operating together for the better can easily succeed, or easily fail. Part of my task has been to try to make more things work that bit more successfully for more people. Whatever the mechanism – I have tried to nudge things towards particular ways of behaving/ways of seeing what we are there for ... what the world is about. This isn't a fixed formula, more an agreed mental framework – worked out together over time – about how we want things to move forward ... 'this is how we do things, isn't it?'

Here are four or five examples of what make up this way of thinking/ acting/ deciding together if we are going to be sure that things will get better for large numbers of ordinary people, sooner rather than later – via mainstream, everyday systems rather than via ‘special projects’. These background operating principles apply at the level of whole province/territory systemic changes and at the level of sets of organisations collectively negotiating the best ways forward to meet the specific needs of particular children and young people.

1. Trying to visualise how things might be (realistically) and looking for bridges forward/gaps etc:

Securing some loose agreements between key organisations and key leaders about what kind of place they want children to grow up in; people to live and work in ... not cast so widely that people can't see way forward; not so unrealistically that can't take any action; but in a firm enough way that there is a joint sense of ‘can do ... will do ... must do ...’.

Take any one of many puzzles (The future of young people in the current economic climate). What might things be like in 2015? So will doing what we do now get us there? If not, is there anything we can do to make the changes to how things are done? So what do we do differently tomorrow?

2. Looking for gaps that can be closed

What does our data, information, intuition tell us about which groups are getting left behind, or making less progress in certain ways. Is that ok or do we need to commit to closing the gaps? By how much/by when? Do we know how to do it (what evidence is there? – does anything work in this context? – If not sure, may have to go with our best guess – which is better than no guess at all).

What might be an example? There are usually issues around the gap in school-level achievements between different groups of pupils. For example the gap between the average for two groups might be 12 percentage points – and a set of agencies may aspire, over 4 years, to halve that gap ... which means closing the gap by 1.5 percentage points/year. Suppose in the area there are 1,000 pupils in their final year, in 15 schools. $1.5\% \text{ of } 1,000 = 15 = 1$ more pupil to succeed in each school? Which sounds do-able!

3. Being formally clear – but reducing bureaucracy

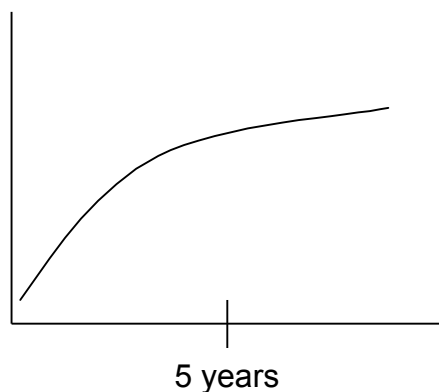
This is more along the lines of ‘accounting for’ rather than just ‘monitoring’. There’s usually a story behind things – it might be a real story or it might be a made up story – and that story is usually far more informative and interesting than any number of charts or percentages. Trying to get to the story behind the progress made (or the lack of progress) can often involve a challenge in how people describe things, the meanings being put on words etc.

Monitoring against a plan or a contract often is at the level of quarterly performances against profile. Sometimes there are expectations: “Failure

to spend will result in money being clawed back.” In a development set of activities things don’t always go to plan – staff leave with a gap to reappointment; unforeseen things arise that need to be explored etc. In these conditions isn’t it wasteful to have to keep going back to the funders around every little change. Isn’t it better to be constantly re-profiling, renegotiating and recycling available resources over three to five years; to be able to agree an immediate, rapid redeployment of monies. This can’t be done if money is parcelled out in lots of separate one-year contracts, but can easily be done if the original agreements were around a broad development framework and a joint commitment to ongoing reviews of what is really needed.

4. Internationally there is now much more emphasis on working to shift resources up front, onto prevention. We largely know what prevents: high quality early years’ childcare/education; parental attachments and relationships in the home – putting the young child’s needs before the parents’ own wants; ensuring good parent/child interaction (not neglect) - stimulating an interest in the world and a development of early language. We know that the level of language between different groups of children at an early age can be very differentiated by 22 months and that this can set different trajectories for the child’s development. The immediate issues have to be dealt with, but at least the same energies need to be put into reducing future occurrences of the same issues where possible.
- Just to be clear, in all the above we are not talking about running ‘projects’; not selling ‘products’; not even describing a particular ‘programme’ – but fostering a way of seeing that things might get done: rapidly; on big enough scale; focusing on changes; in partnership/collectively not talking in terms of ‘mine’/‘yours’; not starting from ‘services’ or ‘organisations’ but encouraging a focus on how to get better outcomes in the lives of people in different communities.

By simply encouraging these kinds of things I’ve seen the significant progress that people working together have been able to make:



With early enthusiasm and determination it has been possible to make very real progress: doubled skills levels; reached national averages – over a 3 to 5 year period

But once we get to the levelling off stage more of same isn't producing the next substantial leap (get 'drift'; get 'bogged down in stuff'; activities get 'fossilised'; development staff stop thinking, they are so busy doing).

So we constantly need to keep going back to the same few principles in our heads and in our collective discussions with partners. Some of these I listed earlier – and they just sounded like common sense. Think of it in terms of an everyday journey:

- Have a joint, agreed sense of direction
- Be realistic, but ambitious, about how far things can go
- Have an overall map/plan but constantly vary as things arise
- Getting everything sorted earlier will prevent problems later

And we can add in a few more:

- Avoid the pitfall of persuading yourself that there's far too much that needs doing, that everything is too complex: For example with child poverty it would be easy to identify a way forward that depends on A – which itself depends on B ... which depends on the government changing C ...which depends on the current economic climate ... etc until it all becomes too complex – and distracts us away from the six things that we reasonably can do. So: start with what is do-able and plan for rest
- Keep re-injecting a sense of urgency (within reality)
 - not lots of meetings (Or are likely to get stuck in the routine of busy people saying: 'I can't possibly fit anything in the diary before November ...'; then Christmas isn't a good time; and I'm on leave in January – so let's arrange to talk again in five months time....')
 - not standing groups that see themselves having a long future: talk in terms of 'task and finish' sessions – 'There's a job to do and three quick sessions to fix it in'. I said earlier that I thought the use of language was important. Is it more effective to be talking in terms of '3 conversations'; or 'one expert seminar whose outcome will be a change to'
 - not lots more reports setting out lots more recommended actions (We've probably made all the recommendations necessary – just need to do some of them; those with most direct leverages)
 - not more consultation/mapping/listing bullet points on flip charts: communities have told us what they want (if we did it properly the first time) and now want delivery
- Trying to keep the focus away from 'money'
We know the usual process: Have 100,000 dollars ... ask for proposals – all come in at 99,999.95. In many of the partnership arrangement I have been involved in partners have been asked for bids for change,

not bids for money ('we can do the money detail later'). If several propose the same changes, isn't it logical to suggest they join energies together?

Don't misunderstand me: Money is important – but it's not the reason to do things if we believe in social change. There may be pragmatic decisions along the way e.g. in the longer term the partnership as a whole may need to keep some organisations in place because want them to be able to step up to the mark and do their bit later in the process – so need to sustain their existence rather than letting the organisation collapse.

'Money too easily becomes the story – We have tried to keep 'change' the story (In simple ways: reports to meetings focus more on changes made/still to be made; less about money available ... not easy when so many staff in so many agencies seem to be fixated with money).

Even quite recently every proposal needed to be 'innovative' (forcing people to keep redefining what needed to be done as 'new stuff'). If we were being realistic about being on a long journey of change together our language would be more about the continued direction of travel; the long haul; the distance still to go; the next stage of the journey, and so on – and less on pretending everything is new or innovative.

- I suppose there will always be debates about whether there has been real progress; or whether the world just got better at measuring; or tests got easier; or teachers started teaching more to the test (rather than exciting kids about learning)

Quite a lot of what we do is based on well-researched activity, with universities have a strong role in this. Of course we would want to make best use of the intelligence to date, promoting those things that research consistently point to as making a difference:

e.g. in schools and literacy:

- pupils working in pairs
- metacognitive strategies taught (prediction; summary)
- classroom management gives time on task; pace to lesson
- phonics, as part of wider set of approaches
- 1:1 'catch up' teaching
- many things applied on whole group bias
- importance of what parents/families do at home

Similarly, there are some fairly common agreements about the things that act as engines of successful change across systems (school; district; territory/province; nation ...):

- leadership (agreements about where the authority/permission/trust is able to be used – distributed throughout different parts of a system)

- understanding of the principles behind proposed changes
- having supportive communities/networks of key people (sometime developing into mini-engines for change e.g. networks of teachers-as-researchers' exploring change in classroom practices)
- continuous learning from insights/research (the partnership being characterised by flexibility, adaptability; openness)
- alignment of local activity with national policy emphases ... alignment of bits so that any gains in one strengthen the likelihoods for gains in another
- having a whole-system view (not 'mine'; 'yours'; 'theirs')
- 'monitoring' seen as jointly reviewing (and revising as context shifts)
- evaluation focusing on effectiveness of getting outcomes (not effectiveness of activities)

For much of this we are relying on common understandings of what is likely to work (usually from metastudies of published research), whilst remembering that often what has been researched is what has had the resources to be researched. Some things may still be effective in practice but not 'research-based', giving it more the sense of an act of faith (however strong our need to be seen as 'scientific'; evidence-based; evaluated etc).

- Where we are now (taking stock in 2009): We would say that we know that one chunk of children and young people and adults are doing well and would do well whatever the system; and that another chunk are doing much better than they were (because of focusing on the mix of approaches outlined so far). We have 'shifted the mean' – which has pulled through some of the 'tail' of underperformances. All of which leaves up to 30% still needing more attention, further exploration, new approaches.

Those still needing to be the focus of our attention are, of course, not a homogenous group:

- Whilst a lot of children and young people feel good about themselves; there are many who experience (on a day to day, consistent basis) things that are unsupportive of their development:
 - anxiety
 - bullying
 - low level mental stresses in families
 - dealing with ill parents
 - family tensions over money/jobs etc

Progress for those lies not in better literacy/numeracy learning but in dealing with their social and emotional contexts.

- Some live in very supportive contexts but may have a range of difficulties/disabilities. Their simple need is for better services than they can get at the moment (especially at times of transition).

- Some live in less supportive families or are able to draw on less resources in their communities. What they need is rapid integrated responses to a range of issues facing the family or the community. As one example, already mentioned, we know the importance of early childhood development and we know the importance of what parents do (not what they are). Is it feasible, in every area where children are not thriving for there to be a Children/Family Centre, staffed with professionals from different backgrounds (education, health, social care, language development, employment services etc), with family support outreach that allows home visits to be made to the more vulnerable, with one common assessment across all services, and a guarantee of interagency rapid responses when issues for a family get too complex for them to manage independently?
- Some, a relatively small proportion maybe – but a group most in danger of never recovering and most in danger of perpetuating problems on into their own adulthood and into their own families (although this is never automatically so) – are the children exposed most to abuse, whose support doesn't click into place, who are left struggling in the system. They need an additional, immediate and robust set of responses.

There is a recognition that things stack up for some families/some communities more than others. Even in difficult times, though, families can be quite resilient. Of the several common risk factors associated with family non-functioning most families are able to cope with 1, 2, even 3 factors. Early interventions can keep the families problems down to a manageable level. Once things get to 4/5 risk factors at once many families are likely to go into sudden collapse. If things implode for too many families in the same community does that mean that there is no hope for those people? Or that the community has to find its own solution? Or that the state steps in heavy handedly?

How far are partnerships there to ensure intervention? Or to ensure capacity building? Or to keep current systems going? Or to bring about change? If a set of partner organisations have the money (and they usually have, between them) and the understanding that the system needs to do things better: What is the best advice to rely on? What do we know from our collective experiences and from research? What decisions do we make (to set things in place for next 5-10 years, for whole sets of people)? And when many agencies are entering a time when public spending is likely to be tightened, how far can we continue to do things alone rather than together?

Puzzles like this sit on the desk of many officials – or linger in the minds of many community activists – or colour the day-to-day realities of decision-making in families ... or should form the agenda for discussions in coalitions and partnerships. As we have seen, such puzzles can be the basis for endless discussion; can be a justification for doing yet more

research, or consultation, or producing yet one more report; or can be the motivation for really trying to improve things across the system i.e. for all those that might benefit.

- None of it is easy**
- Something has to be done**
- Usually collaboratively with others**
- Ensuring good use of each and every dollar**
- More importantly – ensuring that there are real changes in the life chances of real individuals**