

Co-operative Inquiry: Changing Interprofessional Practice

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Recent government guidance concerning the welfare of children emphasizes the necessity for change in interprofessional practice. This paper examines how co-operative inquiry enabled a diverse professional group to inquire into how change can be promoted in complex practice systems. It considers the influence of external stakeholders, highlights the consequent tension between task and process, and addresses the implications for the role of facilitators.

KEY WORDS: Co-operative inquiry; interprofessional; multiple stakeholders.

1. INTRODUCTION

This is an account of a recently concluded co-facilitated inquiry. It involved 14 people who train professionals to work together in the “spaces between” the large number of organizations concerned with child protection in different parts of England. The inquiry’s focus question was “how can interagency training be used to promote change in complex practice systems?” The question was stimulated by the publication of two pieces of central Government guidance that demanded change, and, as a consequence, the need to inquire into how implementation would be managed.

In many ways, it was an ordinary inquiry with characteristics that will be familiar to those who use the method. In some ways, as groups always are, it was different. We feel as if the dust is just settling around our experience and we are beginning to see the shape of it sufficiently well to distinguish between its ordinariness and aspects that may be different. Consequently, we draw attention to the challenge of managing a complex environment and multiple stakeholders during the initiation and subsequent processes of the inquiry. Our boundaries were highly permeable and the ebb and flow across them brought richness and relevance

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into the inquiry process. It also brought tough facilitation issues that felt alien to a fundamentally co-operative climate.

2. A COMPLEX ENVIRONMENT FOR INQUIRY

In recent years, child protection work has dominated state child welfare services in Britain. However, research (Department of Health, 1995) indicates that the emphasis given to incidents of abuse has led to a lack of attention to the supportive services designed to address the wider needs of children and their families. The wider contexts within which children live have been neglected. For example, many children whose parents are experiencing difficulties relating to mental ill health, learning disability, drug and/or alcohol misuse, domestic violence, and extreme poverty, are receiving too few services.

As part of the Government's objectives to improve outcomes for children, two new guidance documents have been published: *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (Department of Health, 1999) and the *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and Their Families* (Department of Health, 2000). The first constitutes a revision of existing interagency guidance setting "out how *all* agencies and professionals should work together to promote children's welfare and protect them from abuse and harm" (Department of Health, 1999, p.vii). The latter outlines the corporate responsibility of all local authority departments, health authorities, and community services to assess children in need and their families. Crucially, it provides a holistic practice framework to be used collaboratively across agencies. The initial document carried no explicit implementation schedule, whereas, by contrast, the *Framework for Assessment* was to be implemented by 1st April, 2001, and incorporated "into the Government guidance on protecting children from harm." While welcomed, in principle, this deadline created a real sense of urgency in local areas.

We share a strong commitment to both multiagency working and interprofessional training. It forms a central part of our respective working lives, so we shared the sense of urgency. We were eager to know how agencies would manage the task of implementing this new guidance during the 12 months prior to 1st April, 2001. We wondered how the attitudinal shift from the protection to the promotion of children's welfare could be facilitated at individual, organizational, and systemic levels. How could the practice changes necessary be initiated and supported?

Conditions were challenging. All the professionals involved in child welfare are currently faced with a plethora of new initiatives. They are working in disabling environments, characterized by repeated reorganizations, with subsequent new structures, policies, and procedures. Fresh managerial relationships and changed priorities sit alongside staff and resource shortages, low morale, and inadequate support and supervision systems. Such contexts are hardly conducive to the "secure setting" (Reder *et al.*, 1993) required for professionals to adapt to yet more changes

in their roles and practice, especially when these alterations have implications for an increase in workload.

We are core members of PIAT (Promoting Interagency Training). It is a seven-person collaborative partnership between academic and child welfare institutions. PIAT aims to promote interagency child protection training, to facilitate a network for those involved, and to provide development opportunities. The challenges associated with new government guidance offered an opportunity to further these aims through a research project that would explore different approaches to the implementation of guidance while they were being developed. Although new to PIAT, co-operative inquiry seemed the obvious methodology; it sits easily with the partnership's culture because of the focus on exploration, participation, reflection, and experimentation, while maintaining attention to *practical outcomes*. This degree of fit secured agreement to fund the inquiry following our strong proposal and we agreed to act as cofacilitators.

PIAT's well-established national network offered a ready framework through which research study group members could be recruited and it gave the project a certain amount of legitimacy and status. The latter also enabled us to secure additional funding from the Department of Health.

The process of recruiting participants began with an invitation to everyone on PIAT's data base. The letter gave brief details of the project, its proposed methodology, and encouraged people with key responsibility for interagency training to apply. Over 50 individuals responded! We were excited to feel others' enthusiasm meeting our own, but the size of the response raised dilemmas of choice. We increased the group size from our initial intention of ten to twelve and established selection criteria that we considered relevant to the task. We included participants from a range of geographical locations and used gender, ethnicity, and professional background to establish balance within the group. Finally, we were 11 women, 2 of whom are Black, and 3 men. Two group members shared a professional background in health; one came from education while the rest, including us, had career histories in social work.

3. NEGOTIATING WITH MULTIPLE STAKEHOLDERS

The key stakeholders in a co-operative inquiry are the inquirers themselves. It is they who make the investment in terms of time, energy, and attention and it is they, hopefully, who will be among the primary beneficiaries. By initiating an inquiry in a complex interorganizational environment, however, there were layers of accountability and interest that we needed to recognize and honor. The recruitment and funding process described above had not only helped us to "make it happen," it inevitably gathered influential people on the boundary of the inquiry, all with qualitatively different investments in it. In practice, this meant that the interests of those at the inquiry boundary demanded our active attention far beyond

the initiation and engagement phase of the group's life. The additional stakeholders that required our attention were its funders and supporters. As Reason and Marshall (1987) simply and elegantly put it, "*inquiry is for me, us, and them*" and all three were apparent from the outset.

3.1. The Funders

PIAT and the Department of Health funded the inquiry for different reasons. We have already described the congruence between PIAT's aims and an action-based research project. The Department of Health, however, was interested primarily in ensuring the successful implementation of high-profile guidance. It was, therefore, keen to use the opportunity that the inquiry offered to spot problems and, as soon as practical, to disseminate good practice lessons or "nuggets" on a national basis. The principal Department of Health commissioning officer, referred to as "DOH," coined the nuggets phrase. He wanted the inquiry to produce both "specific nuggets" relating to the implementation of current guidance, as well as "general nuggets" that would be useful in guiding future interagency implementation processes. He persisted in using the word "evaluation" to describe our intention. We persistently challenged that description about both the process and outcomes of the inquiry. We were not in a position to mount an evaluation and were resistant to the expectations that would accompany that status. As negotiations progressed, it became clear that at the heart of our difference lay, not surprisingly, a paradigm mismatch which focused on the issue of validity and legitimate knowledge. We were proposing to work with 12 people representing the experience of 12 different local settings and we saw their experience and the knowing that would flow from that as legitimate. It was not, however, demonstrably representative of *all* implementation activity nationally. DOH, understandably, was concerned about this. There are more than 150 local authorities in England; how could we be confident that the inquiry's findings were representative of others? We could not, of course, but we found a middle place between our differences. DOH found a bit more money, which bought time, and we agreed to construct a questionnaire that reflected the key questions emerging from the inquiry group. We also agreed to find a way of administering it to a number of nonparticipating authorities in order to "test" the experience of the inquiry group. In fact, although identified as a compromise, this proved to be an important part of the inquiry process and may have accelerated ownership and participation within the group. Given this high level of investment, it was agreed that DOH would attend the initial, midpoint, and penultimate meetings of the inquiry in order to stay tuned to the issues arising.

Reason and Bradbury (2001) illuminate the useful distinction between first-, second-, and third-person research. In this case, the needs and interests of one primary funder moved our inquiry from a focus that was exclusively first and second person to that which proactively included the third person. The questionnaire provided a tangible vehicle for inquirers to explicitly generate conversations with

others who, while outside the group, influenced its process, outcomes, and, possibly, its potential to exercise influence in the wider political environment that had stimulated the need for inquiry in the first place.

3.2. The Supporters

Standing in the shadow behind the 12 inquirers, literally and metaphorically, were the employing organizations that had agreed to bear the multiple costs of their employee's participation in the research. The countable costs were time (10 days minimum), travel, and expenses, which for some was considerable. Given the focus of the inquiry, it is also important to note that the costs were born by the public purse, and, in particular, the purse that supports some of the most vulnerable members of society. This contributed to the internal pressure and responsibility that we both felt, as initiators, to make it worthwhile. The needs and expectations of this shadow group remained tacit throughout the inquiry and we could never be clear whether we were meeting them. They will have been expressed indirectly through individual participants in a variety of ways. However, as the inquiry progressed, and participants were better able to articulate gains for themselves and their organizations, so too our confidence increased that the support offered by employers was warranted.

“... ideas and questions generated at each meeting of the group has fed back into and influenced the ongoing development and implementation of the assessment framework in my county.”

During initiation, however, support rested on an employer's capacity to make courageous acts of faith, invest in people and/or trust the authority that PIAT and the Department of Health brought to the project.

A second group of supporters stood behind us as facilitators. Formally, they were the five other members of PIAT's Steering Group that had endorsed our idea and encouraged it as a part of PIAT's annual work calendar. Informally, they are our colleagues, mentors, and friends with whom we have worked closely for several years. We agreed that we would report back to them at our quarterly meetings and use them to guide and support our professional task as facilitators.

Their investment in the inquiry was multilayered; they trusted us to work in a new way under the PIAT banner and to manage the relationship with the Department of Health. We were also responsible for finding ways of bringing learning into the network.

4. THE INFLUENCE OF EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS: THE INESCAPABLE CONNECTEDNESS OF SYSTEMS

In Heron's (1996, p. 48) terms, this was primarily an informative inquiry. The intention was to explore and shed light on the processes chosen to generate

the systemic change demanded by central Government. The outcomes of such an inquiry could be predicted to be primarily propositional and presentational, for example, in the form of written reports. That proved to be the case, but it seemed, and it *felt*, more complicated than that. As we circulated, edited, and reediting the group's final report among us, we identified a number of other environmental factors that have affected the quality of the inquiry and, in particular, the feelings generated by the process.

As we have already said, we work in a field of professional practice (child protection) permeated by uncertainty and anxiety. This has many consequences (Woodhouse & Pengelly, 1991), but for us it felt as if the sense of urgency to "produce the goods" as facilitators may have been accentuated as a consequence.

Secondly, we were launching the inquiry at a time when as a direct consequence of new guidance, the practice system was destabilized, hence increasing individual and organizational uncertainty and anxiety. There was little firm ground to stand on and, at the beginning, no one knew "how to *do* implementation." So, there was a real fear that we would explore, and discover . . . nothing! In this case, it did not feel OK to value the journey alone; there was considerable investment in the destination.

Thirdly, we were working with people unaccustomed to a research method that is fundamentally allowing, rather than shaping, in its process. As mentioned above, participants were accountable for their time and effort to employing bodies. Therefore, it was a key facilitator task to hold the balance between abstract and concrete processes; to generate outcomes that were seen as valuable while staying true to the central principles of inquiry. It felt risky doing things differently, working counterculturally, but we held the resultant facilitator tension. Some of the group members captured this balancing act in their reflections. One comments on the positive quality of working differently:

There was an experience of space and openness within this process (co-operative inquiry) that felt very different than the usual working groups I am involved in. This was interesting given the scale of the task and the number of days (available). I expected to feel crowded by an 11 AM–4 PM schedule and in fact I never felt rushed. I had a real sense of activity flowing out of us being together, rather than us striving to reach some predetermined goal and never quite making it; a common characteristic of organisational working!"

While another addressed the worst fear:

The disadvantage of working in this way might be that the *group might never produce anything of value* (authors emphasis), . . . I was sometimes concerned that this might happen, and this concern increased as time passed—though the facilitators provided reassurance in a number of ways: *they* didn't seem to be panicking; they were obviously prepared to see that a product emerged . . . It will probably be for others to judge whether the product is in the end sufficient warrant for the costs involved!

5. THE PROCESS

So, what did it look like in practice? After 6 months of negotiation and recruitment, we came together to begin the 10-day inquiry. The pattern of meetings we adopted was common to other inquiries. Our first and last 2 days were residential; the intervening 6 days were scheduled at 6 weekly intervals. Participation levels varied. Only three of us managed all ten sessions, although a central core of eight evolved, leaving others, less active, but still engaged, on the periphery. One member withdrew formally. It seems increasingly difficult to use levels of participation as an indicator of commitment in overburdened public sector environments. As Mead (this issue), working with the police reflects, this is a “consistent and inevitable feature of organisational life.”

There are a number of ways in which one can describe and reflect on process; we have used Heron’s ideas (Heron, 1992) of a “cyclic flow of energy, as through the four seasons of the year.” Writing this during an astonishingly abundant English spring made the choice easy. His framework has enabled us to discern the different phases or seasons through which the inquiry group passed:

Wintertime: the ground may be frozen, and the weather stormy.
Springtime: new life starts to break through the surface crust.
Summertime: there is an abundance of growth, and the sun is high.
Autumn: the fruit is harvested and stored, the harvesters give thanks and go their way.
(Heron, 1992, pp. 26–27).

We anticipated starting our journey in wintertime, visualizing the low levels of trust and high degrees of anxiety commonly associated with a group getting to know each other. Moreover, we expected the seasons to follow their usual sequential pattern as the group opened up, flourished, and, finally, harnessed their ideas and learning.

5.1. Initiating

This group started in springtime, both literally and metaphorically. There were a number of factors that accelerated its’ initial stages. Everyone had made an enthusiastic commitment and most had some connection with another; a professional starting point that enabled initial links. Everyone had knowledge of the PIAT network and the way it works and the venue was familiar and nurturing. Our first preoccupation was to use these gifts well and make facilitator choices that would set the tone and ethos for the whole (Hunter, Bailey, & Taylor, 1992). The participants who were well aware of the need to construct a safe working environment, and had the skills, as trainers, to do it, helped all this.

The group gathered in the late afternoon and, in the first session, focused exclusively on each other, exploring respective roles, work settings, and what it was about the inquiry that had grabbed individual interest and attention. This revealed

diverse motivations; some were anxious to connect with a national network during this time of change, others were attracted by the idea of working proactively and cooperatively, while a few were seeking a supportive group capable of counteracting the isolation and uncertainty they were currently experiencing in their roles. DOH arrived, a bit later than arranged, in the midst of this, but our fears about his potentially inhibiting effect were unfounded; the discussion continued unimpeded.

DOH was invited to outline the Department of Health's role and interest in supporting the inquiry group. The position had not changed; the Department was ultimately concerned to know what it has been possible to achieve through implementation and what, as a Department, it could do to facilitate best practice. This openness to learning from the inquiry group's collective experiences appeared to relieve some underlying uncertainty about DOH. Shoulders relaxed as anxiety dissipated. As facilitators, we were relieved that time spent in early negotiation appeared to have been successful; we could get on with the inquiry without worrying about continually renegotiating externally imposed expectations. As for the others, their experience and knowledge were to be honored and respected and contribute to central Government's learning. People were freed to engage in further group building, allowing the tentative spring shoots of trust to mature a little.

The next day, we introduced key features of co-operative inquiry and continued to focus on building a working group. We addressed the challenge of how to stay connected and hold on to the inquiry process over time. How could we sustain the early fragile stages of commitment to the research study with a group of inexperienced inquirers vulnerable to the demands and pulls of their individual working contexts? We chose concrete and achievable tasks. Meeting dates for the year were negotiated and a contact list for circulation was generated as some sort of insurance policy to maintain the connections. The absence of some participants prompted a suggestion that the group should identify pairs, with each taking responsibility for keeping absentees up to date with the group's progress and process. This early proposal from the group was encouraging, both from the "insurance" angle and as a tangible demonstration of commitment. Trust and safety were beginning to feel very real.

Working principles were agreed and, again, the experience of the group, as trainers, helped this process. Not surprisingly, confidentiality was highlighted, as we would be discussing identifiable work settings and personalities. This discussion was freed up by a facilitator risking a personal story. Being "safe enough" to divulge the tale, and trusting the group to keep the specific details to themselves, led to further sharing of anxieties. One person admitted struggling to understand some of the previous day's discussion, reinforcing how crucial it was for us to be able to ask naïve questions without fear of criticism or censure.

Holding an appropriate balance between the person-focused and professional tasks seemed a crucial facilitation issue at this early stage. In an informative inquiry, it was important to allow enough time during our first session together to

make some task progress. Mindful of the invisible stakeholders and the “product” culture in which participants worked, we made a judgment to move on and identify our “first-step” research questions. This led to two separate tasks being undertaken. Those with education and health backgrounds chose to work together, examining individual concerns and clustering these under emergent thematic headings. The others tried to map out their current implementation processes. Both became engrossed in this reflective cycle, pulling their experience into presentational form, listening to and analyzing the similarities and uniqueness of the “maps” produced. Out of this came our first “product,” a list of preliminary implementation questions. These focused on how the implementation of the new guidance was being managed in individual areas: Who was responsible for the task? Were implementation groups multiagency? Did they hold a brief to develop an implementation strategy? Were explicit links being forged between the two guidance documents? This product served a number of useful purposes. It gave everyone a sense of achievement. Second, it illustrated, for first timers, how co-operative inquiry had enabled us to surface and work with issues in a rigorous and systematic way. Thirdly, it demonstrated how the group’s move from presentational (pie charts and post-its) to propositional (key implementation questions) knowledge. Before departure, we reviewed our first residential together. There was excitement about the process, valuing “*the positive feel to the work,*” and people were eager to take the key questions back into their own working environments and write up their “maps” for sharing at the next meeting. As facilitators, we were encouraged but retained a cautious optimism, being mindful that after an early spring, colder conditions can return.

6. MAINTAINING MOMENTUM

We met 6 weeks later and opened with personal news rounds. Individual story telling, as with other inquiries, became an embedded part of our process. It provides a gateway for the individual to reenter the group and a shared ground from which themes can be identified for further more co-operative work. In this session, the discussion settled and resettled on boundary and structural issues amid uncertain and confused agency settings. It was clear that within their daily working environments uncertainty and confusion surrounded the implementation of the new guidance as individual agencies struggled to appreciate its implications and the changes necessary at policy and practice levels. There were explicit concerns about whose problem implementation was; was it the responsibility of Social Services to drive initiatives or should there be wider interagency ownership of change? We wondered if these feelings mirrored views of the inquiry group with participant uncertainty about its process. Story telling consumed the entire morning, raised innumerable questions and, with them, anxiety. Springtime had been put on hold.

Reflecting on the stories in the group, four potential inquiry questions emerged.

- What range of variables across authorities are affecting implementation?
- What environmental and “cultural” factors affect the nature and shape of the implementation process?
- What outcomes are we after that could be named and measured?
- Who are the most powerful stakeholders in the implementation process?

Would these organizing questions introduce a definite focus and reduce feelings of confusion? We were active as facilitators and moved the group to focus. They selected the stakeholder question for further exploration. This was the point when spring returned as the group started to own the inquiry process and steer it, directing their energies into a sense-making exercise. As it turned out, the activity proved to be overwhelming and lacking in clarity, although a good dose of humor prevented a slide into despondency. However, the group held on to its tentative ownership of the research process by making future plans. Our working space was a large conference room. Our physical boundaries were less obvious and, despite pieces of paper strewn over the floor, we struggled to fill the room. It seemed to reflect the outside world and the about how to successfully implement the new guidance.

As the inquiry progressed, we found the metaphor of the mirror (Mattinson, 1975) increasingly helpful as facilitators. By asking ourselves the question “what is going on *here* that may be reflective of elsewhere?,” we were able to identify and work with the open system phenomenon, where strategies employed in one relationship system may be carried over and affect an adjacent system (Woodhouse & Pengelly, 1991, p. 29).

Meeting four earned the title “Mind the Gap!” Opening stories were packed with tales of discrepancies between what was advocated and actual action. There was a crisis in belief that implementation was possible. This was further complicated by the forthcoming visit from DOH and our commitment to turn key issues arising from the group into a questionnaire for wider use. What progress was there to show this influential funder? What tangible issues had been identified that could be explored by those outside of the study group? In terms of our season’s analogy, the early shoots had not flourished sufficiently to be recognized by DOH. The facilitator choices, at times like this, seemed really challenging. How long do you hold uncertainty and chaos in the knowledge that a pattern will emerge? If you move the group into structure to reduce confusion, is that out of responsibility or one’s own anxiety? What is authentic in these conditions? We chose to be proactive, offering a conceptual model around which we could focus. This reenergized the group who grasped key practice questions about implementation and began to crystallize their own thoughts. Again mirroring the divisions evident in the outside world, the nonsocial work members elected to work together. Trust and safety, like early blooms, were fragile and needed nurturing. The level of emotional expression had increased dramatically, language changed, and this tough session ending

optimistically. People felt “reassured that the same problems are everywhere,” “revived” and “stimulated.” The gap between springtime and summer had not disappeared, but warmer days were now expected.

The first shift in the pattern of a facilitator led opening came in session five. This was a clear indication of the group’s growing ownership of the inquiry process. One of the men opened the meeting informally by distributing a paper, which generated a lively discussion and moved us to specific areas for work. This spirited discourse counterbalanced the “let down” feeling engendered by a late apology from DOH. His absence reflected the outside reality where meetings to plan the implementation process in local areas were characterized by the absence of key individuals. Small interest groups worked independently on separate tasks stemming from the inquiry questions generated during an earlier meeting. The first concentrated on developing practice indicators to measure implementation progress, the second considered the consequences flowing from different implementation models, while the third extrapolated key messages needing to be communicated to all agencies from the new guidance. Each group reported progress and, most importantly, agreed to undertake concrete development work between meetings. This was further evidence of the group taking responsibility for and ownership of the process and, therefore, as facilitators it felt supportive, not a take-over, when we agreed to draft a questionnaire from issues that they had identified. Summer had arrived during a day of purposeful co-operation with everyone fully immersed in tasks, different professional backgrounds forgotten, and a deeper level of understanding developed and expanded.

7. SUSTAINING

Summertime was short lived. The group gathered for session six demoralized and depressed by recent experiences. “Mind the Gap” resurfaced as a metaphor. Story telling focused on the personal. Three had new jobs, while some others faced great uncertainty about the future of their posts. Frustration levels were high. Implementation processes had “reached a plateau” with “agencies working in parallel rather than in a connected process.” Researching in the moment can be frustrating, as well as exciting, although the messy process means a lack of certainty about the usefulness and applicability of what emerges. Had the group reached an inquiry plateau, being unable to utilize its work in practice? Was the research process running alongside what was practically possible? In an atmosphere of psychological defensiveness, it felt like winter. The ground felt very hard and the earlier blooms seemed to have withered and died. As facilitators, we were unprepared for this sharp, cold spell.

Ownership of the group had slipped backward, rendering the process very facilitator driven. It was hard work and drew heavily on our confidence. However,

ventilating frustrations reenergised the group who reengaged with a cycle of reflection and action, developing and elaborating ideas that had been circulating. These ultimately became a central product; an agreed set of practice indicators for direct use in their work. We also agreed on a way in which group members could use the questionnaire and feedback results. Were we fleeing to task or was this appropriate in the circumstances? Seizing work and owning it was noticeably powerful. The inquiry group offered respite from disabling work settings and it produced useful tools! Hence our accelerated progress through winter, springtime, and into summer where creativity took hold.

8. CREATING

By session seven we were in high summer. Success stories in the opening news round were optimistic: local implementation processes were now more concrete, with interagency training happening, and individuals receiving positive feedback. The focus in the group began to shift, moving from the initial attention to self, to inquiring with one another, and now to the outside world. There was a distinct sense of a journey speeding up, both in terms of the internal inquiry process and external implementation processes. The group took responsibility for and recognized the need to move from information gathering to sense making and decide on the final report's structure at the next meeting. Autumn was nearing and people were preparing to transfer their learning to the world outside.

DOH came and acted as a catalyst for reflection in session eight. Each participant reviewed the implementation pathway in his/her area, emphasizing key issues. Although story telling, these reports were qualitatively different, being slick presentations offering a longer perspective in which positive interagency aspect were highlighted. Implementation was described as a doable, if imperfect, process. Reflections on the questionnaire data confirmed individual experiences. We moved toward concluding our work together, identifying outstanding tasks to be tackled at our last meeting. Autumn came closer as we reflected on what generalizable messages from the study needed to be delivered, in what form, and to which audience in the outside world.

Our final 2-day residential was very autumnal. The opening welcome included an announcement of the sudden death at work of one of the venue's staff the previous day. This had a catalytic effect on the story telling. Personal hopes, fears, and struggles were shared with a number of participants, acknowledging the supportive nature of the group, "seeing me through something which was not its job." The dominant themes were personal. Individuals took the center stage, talking of alterations in their personal circumstances, work uncertainties, or potential new job options.

Enormous concern was expressed about missing members, who embodied the loss facing the group. There was evident sadness about the group drawing to

a close at both personal and professional levels. We moved through a number of reflective cycles about the inquiry method and process, about ways of knowing and models of learning, and about the identification of remaining tasks and consequent future needs. From these came an agenda and loose timetable to guide us through the 2 days. Small groups threw themselves into tasks relating to the production of our final report. One group drew together a set of underlying principles essential for the effective implementation of new interagency guidance, while the other endeavored to describe actual or potential blocks in implementation processes. Industry proliferated! By teatime, the room was a physical mess with post-its covering the windows and paper concealing the tables; the atmosphere was vibrant. A late summer burst in autumn!

When our attention turned to reflections on the inquiry process as a method of learning, common themes emerged. Story telling was highlighted as “freeing” and opening up issues, while encouraging reflection and analysis of the narratives. Issues of choice and power were raised, with the group being described as very equal, noncompetitive, and free of gender issues. Awareness of professional background differences had disappeared. The absence of a power imbalance enabled real choice alongside opportunities to shape the content of the work. The absence of a fixed structure allowed shared learning to “flow out of the core of experience” rather than individual development being stifled or closed off to others’ information and experiences. The experience of reflective space and openness within the process contrasted sharply with the pace of usual working life where individuals felt “very driven” and “increasingly activist,” and employers had benefited from the group’s energy recycled into organizations.

Our final morning was “very task orientated.” Anxious to harvest learning, respective tasks continued. Once results were shared, another reflective cycle began as we checked our understanding, challenged new ideas and reviewed their fit with the latest products. The set of principles covered key messages about implementing new guidance and addressed the obstacles identified. We all agreed these were beginning to look like the “nuggets” that DOH had wanted and it was possible to see the way in which the content for our final report would evolve. As facilitators we were trusted to hold on to all the threads and draft a document for circulation. We moved naturally to discussing next steps. Reviewing the whole process identified issues likely to require future attention. We explored the possibility of coming together again in 6 months, partly to mitigate the sense of loss, but also to update our stories and consider any feedback received about our report. Coming together in future made the ending easier; sadness tinged with anticipation. We closed with a celebration of each other and what had happened. Regrets were few, although most would have liked to do more work between sessions. Numerous things were appreciated, too many to detail here. However, without doubt, we all went away with enhanced personal learning, feeling we had generated “more than the sum of individual parts.”

9. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Looking back, our reflections settles on a number of inter-related aspects of our shared experience. First, it feels really important that the inquiry offered a qualitatively different space to that in which public sector organizations currently operate. Working in confusing and exhausting environments, the group was inevitably predisposed to finding inquiry helpful. It gave them time and space to reflect and move their collective reflections on into helpful propositions with which to inform their practice. As the process developed, it reminded us of what we all know; that working with complexity is emotionally and intellectually testing and needs to be supported. And we also know that we too often create and tolerate working environments that operate as if that is not the case.

Given our chosen focus, it is neither surprising nor inappropriate that task dominated our process. We worked with the responsibility to create tangible “products” to satisfy our multiple stakeholders and have reached our target; we have sent the groups’ report to DOH. But we value, and are moved by, inquiry outcomes that are less observable. People are changed through inquiry. It seems that in the most informative of inquiries, transformation is possible. Inquiry offers people the opportunity to develop two particular skills on which the method turns; the capacity to fully participate with others in exploratory learning and the ability to develop high quality attention to one’s own behavior; to study oneself in action and bring that study into the inquiry group openly. This combination presents a considerable challenge. The method invites one to develop and hold intense curiosity about the *other(s)*’ practice while encouraging, with equal intensity, a focus on the *self* in action. Reason (1994) calls this latter skill critical subjectivity.

Critical subjectivity means that we do not suppress our primary subjective experience, that we accept that our knowing is from a perspective; it also means that we are aware of that perspective, and of its bias, and that we articulate it in our communications. Critical subjectivity involves a self-reflexive attention to the ground on which one is standing (Reason, 1994, p. 327)

One member’s account illustrates this happening:

In meetings which I lead, I am more task-oriented, more dominant, more anxious (than the facilitators). Do I get the best out of the members of those groups? Over the year, I have become more facilitative, more open, less anxious, more protective of less assertive members—I am learning. Those meetings are becoming less stressful and more productive, and I believe that the members have felt more committed to the outcomes.

This is a primary, legitimate and valid outcome of inquiry.

We are also reflecting on the paradox of introducing a questionnaire, an old paradigm method, in the midst of inquiry. It was both surprising and productive in its consequences. The ability to demonstrate the similarity of thinking with those outside the group, to engage the third person directly, gave our work a sense of

validity, which, in turn, helped to counteract some of the concerns outlined above. We have learned, again, the value of eclecticism, particularly when working in a complex interagency context.

Finally, our “seasons” did not unfold as anticipated. The early spring and summer had not predicted the brief, but harsh, winter that we experienced. Although it was shortlived, it led to a fruitful autumn. This skewed seasonal pattern reinforces our view that while explanatory frameworks are helpful for understanding and planning group process, they can never be predictive. They need to be held lightly as a rough guide rather than a detailed itinerary of a groups journey. The language of Heron’s model lingers, however. We know that the personal harvest from the inquiry has been great, it will take time to see whether interprofessional practice, that we set out to influence, will benefit from the crop!

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