

EVALUATING INTERAGENCY PRACTICE PRELIMINARY STEPS

Report: Literature with potential application for work of Interagency Convenors 14 March 2019

Author: Simon Emsley, Capacity Building, Community Resource Network, Blacktown, NSW

This paper arises from the adopted intention of the Blacktown and Hills Interagency Convenors Interagency to develop a 'community of practice' in relation to the objectives and challenges presenting to the convenors of interagencies. Being prepared for the fourth meeting of that body, it is exploratory and tabled for purposes of discussion.

The work has been possible due to its alignment with Community Resource Network's (CRN) preparatory work for transition to funding under the Targeted Earlier Intervention Program (New South Wales Department of Families and Community Services). The TEI Program encourages a greater use of evidence-based practice.

As a convenor of the Blacktown Combined Interagency, CRN has a strong interest in evidence-based practice supporting the conduct of interagencies. CRN contributes its recent work on the evaluation of interagency practice here to support collaboration leading to improved evidence-based practice for interagencies.

This paper briefly reports on the finding of this work to date through the examination of three literature reviews. Links to the papers discussed are embedded below.

REVIEWING INTERAGENCY WORK

Most directly relevant to interagency work is 'A literature review of inter-agency work with a particular focus on children's services' (CAAB Report No.4, 2009). In this case, the literature reviewed is mostly of Irish origin.

The CAAB report notes that the Children Acts Advisory Board (Ireland) was, on its foundation, charged with "the promotion of interagency cooperation including the sharing of information." While the paper is oriented to the interagency collaborations associated with child protection and juvenile justice casework, its comments have a wider scope with potential for interagency work in general.

KEY FINDINGS

- The report's executive summary notes the relative paucity of evidence supporting the Irish government's stated confidence in the efficacy of interagency work: "CAAB and the researchers yielded what can only be considered to be limited research and evaluation literature that focuses specifically on the contribution of inter-agency working to the achievement of better service development and delivery."
- The available evidence did not lead to the identification of good practice".
- Interagency work is contextual: ". . . one of the clear issues to arise is the extent to which inter-agency initiatives are determined by their context"
- Definition of 'interagency' is inconsistent – frustrating generalisations
- A strong theoretical basis for an interagency is important
- A strong and uncritical consensus that interagency work can address complex problems, builds policy cohesion, economies of scale, but little hard evidence to support these claims.
- A range of tools and structures is available to interagencies, but little guidance on where they should be applied
- There is a strong tendency for service users to be excluded from assessment processes.

- Research has identified enabling and inhibiting factors for interagencies
- Research has noted the potential advantages to attending staff from networking, raised profile and better understanding of other agencies roles.

The review cited above can be downloaded from <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/34716652.pdf>

MEASURING CAPACITY BUILDING IN COMMUNITIES

'Measuring capacity building in communities: a review of the literature' (Liberato et al., 2011) found a similar lack of available evaluation method in respect to 'capacity building'. The Australian research team used a realistic synthesis review method to assess 1114 relevant papers. In this case the focus of intervention was in the sphere of public health, but again the perimeters of the study allow generalisation to the interagency context. The result of its review method was to derive 9 domains which are most commonly valued in capacity building literature, of which interagency literature can be seen as a subset.

KEY FINDINGS

- The following domains have proved of predominant interest in entities seeking to assess capacity building:

Key domains

"learning opportunities and skills development"
 "resource mobilization"
 "partnership/linkages/networking"
 "leadership"
 "participatory decisionmaking"
 "assetsbased approach"
 "sense of community"
 "communication"
 "development pathway"

Subdomains

"shared vision and clear goals"
 "community needs assessment"
 "process and outcome monitoring"
 "sustainability"
 "commitment to action"
 "dissemination".

- Context is important when choosing which domains to use to create an assessment tool.
- The context and purpose of capacity building has a determining role in its assessment.

The review cited above can be downloaded from:
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3229539/>

MEASURES OF COMMUNITY CAPACITY FOR COMMUNITY-BASED FUNDING PROGRAMS IN CANADA (MACLELLAN-WRIGHT ET AL. 2009)

The review of Maclellan-Wright et al. (2009) followed a systematic method and also included the use of an expert panel to derive nine assessment domains broadly comparable with the domains later found in Liberato et al.. The domains were used to develop the first instrument available to the Public Health Agency of Canada to evaluate capacity building projects. The resulting instrument provides "quantitative and qualitative information on community capacity within the context and scope of community-based funding programs." The results of the trial are reported in the paper.

KEY FINDINGS

- Capacity building is observed in the development of a set of assets and attributes that enable a community to take action
- In the context of the health field to which the paper is oriented the authors settle on the definition provided by NSW Health (2001): *an approach to the development of sustainable skills, organizational structures, resources and commitment to health improvement in health and other sectors, to prolong and multiply health gains many times over*. (New South Wales Health Department, 2001).
- The trial of the capacity building instrument with 29 community organisations found interest in using the tool for project planning and evaluation.
- Evaluation development and processes can be used as part of a broader stakeholder engagement.

The tool has been adapted to assess capacity in the context of community economic development. The review cited above can be downloaded from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/17942594>