

REVIEW: PROVIDING FOR CHILDREN

Hugh O'Donnell

Ann Glaister and Bob Glaister, **Inter-Agency Collaboration: Providing for Children**, Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press, 2005, 96pp, pb, £11.95, ISBN 1903765145.

Since its inception in 1999, the Scottish Executive has produced a veritable flood of legislation aimed at improving the lot of children, particularly those regarded as either being vulnerable or from socially excluded communities and families. It was clear from the outset that the Scottish Executive had rightly taken on board the concept of attempting to deliver a system which set all of the agencies engaged with children on a path of 'joined up working', aimed at delivering the best possible outcome for the child. It is a 'holistic' approach which has considerable merit and should form the basis of the inclusiveness agenda being driven by Scottish Executive departments.

However, mere political aspiration will not make such an approach happen, nor will a raft of well intentioned legislation or the repetition of the 'partnership working' mantra. It requires degrees of willingness, innovative thinking and original approaches by those on the ground to meet the challenges posed by objectives which may take them outside the comfort zones of past professional practice and statutory obligation. The potential financial, operational and attitudinal difficulties in developing an effective joined up approach are exacerbated by the need, at a very fundamental level, to carry forward the existing workload and its associated pressures whilst finding the necessary time to develop the close inter-agency relationships and mutual understanding that will make the collaboration work.

In due course the Scottish Executive will produce a report on the progress that is being made in relation to the 'joined up working agenda (s)' and the various 'outcomes' which have been achieved or remain outstanding. It is questionable

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whether a government publication will provide practitioners with exemplars from the front line or of significant detail. In the intervening time there is undoubtedly a gap in the literature which provides practical examples of the impact that this particular policy position has on the practise of those professionals working with children.

In keeping with its reputation for publishing high quality material which seeks to inform and stimulate professional and public debate on the critical subject of education, the 'Policy and Practice in Education' series has produced yet another interesting and informative collection of front line case studies on the topic of **Inter-Agency Collaboration: Providing for Children**. The volume, edited by Ann and Bob Glaister, provides a valuable insight into the challenges, successes, and occasional failures experienced by professionals from various backgrounds who are tasked, by policy, legislation and the demands of changing practice, to work in a more holistic way for the benefit of the children they work with.

Opening with a clear contextualising piece, which places the whole issue in the framework of the wider educational debate and the relevant legislation, by Bronwen Cohen, and concluding with a useful summation by the editors, the book manages to convey a flavour of the various perspectives and situations that may confront the practitioner and interest the more general reader. The varied exemplars are provided by experienced practitioners in the field and offer a comprehensive range of perspectives on the experiences of inter-agency work.

This is done by way of evidential examples of inter-agency working from both urban and rural regions in Scotland, and includes both positive and negative outcomes for the children involved, although, interesting as the case studies are, by far the most revealing aspects of the entire book is the frequency with which underlying inter-agency tensions are revealed, challenged and for the most part apparently overcome. Whilst the examples used throughout the book provide an insight into the innovative ways in which the various agencies created a joined-up approach, another significant aspect highlighted in various chapters is the extent to which the structural and operational differences of agencies, even down to the timing of annual leave for staff, can impact upon both the practical delivery of services and the initial attitudes of individuals to the practices of other agencies.

The need for collaboration for the holistic approach to providing services to work is relatively obvious, but the one area which this latest offering from

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'Policy and Practice in Education' is remiss in not exploring in any great detail is the way the various projects are funded. It can be argued that whilst the willing participation of the various agencies and their staff in the move to more collaborative working is critical to its success, there seems to be an equally strong argument that the pivotal element relates to the ongoing funding that accompanies the strategy.

The Scottish Executive's commitment to driving forward the 'joined –up agenda' has seen a variety of new funding structures and instruments put in place to encourage the development of new and more formally organised collaborative services. Many of these are outcome driven, involve a bidding process and are, anecdotally at least, somewhat bureaucratic in process, so it would have been informative to have some examples of particular successes in relation to finance. There are some indications that much of the funding is both ring fenced and time limited, leading some observers not involved directly with service provision to be concerned about the long term viability of inter-agency projects, and it will be interesting to learn how the various initiatives have been sustained in the face of any subsequent changes to funding allocation.

Even in a volume of only seventy two pages (plus a comprehensive bibliography and index) space should have been found for a chapter on finance but, that small criticism aside, the book adds substantially to the lexicon of knowledge and understanding of the triumphs, trials and tribulations of developments which will almost certainly grow in significance as the provision of services moves into the twenty-first century.

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