

How ALICSE presentations have facilitated developments in Multi-Agency Team working, and professional learning and dissemination.

Abstract

Under the last few years of the previous Labour Governments (1997-2010) in England, UK, infrastructure was improved to enable groups of public sector leaders to work together collaboratively. A programme called ALICSE was devised and led in the East Midlands region of England. This programme for Advanced Leadership in an Integrated Children's Service Environment was created in 2010 by the Directors of Children's Services (DCS's). ALICSE has been delivered at the National College for School Leadership and Children's Services (NCSLCS) through the School Development Support Agency (SDSA). One of the five universities involved in the collaborative partnership chose to move their assessment from a 5,000 word essay to an Academic Poster Presentation, a move that was subsequently made into a core process for the next ALICSE cohort. This paper traces this process and discusses why this is a way forward for work based professional learning, particularly those involved in Multi-Agency Team (MAT) working.

Key words: Advanced Leadership, Integrated Children's Services, Multi-Agency Team (MAT) Working, Social Work, Education, Social Policy, Work Based Learning, Academic Poster Presentations.

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Integrated Leadership is still a young area, often discussed by Social Workers and others involved in Children's Services who are far more used to being part of Multi-Agency Teams (MATs) than is the case in the wider world of Education. The Advanced Leadership in an Integrated Children's Service Environment (ALICSE) programme is not just aimed at Social Workers but those who work in all manner of Children's Service Environments: policing, health visitors, housing staff, care in the community staff, commissioning staff in unitary authorities and those in third sector organisations, such as care groups working with domestic abuse.

After a 17-month-old English boy died in London after suffering more than fifty injuries in an eight month period, during which he was seen by many professionals (Outhwaite, 2011), there was a media outcry, and on-going media response to the "Baby P" situation (Jones, 2008). This led to the publication of a new national professional development framework (DCSF, 2008b). Some of which also fed into the 2010 Child Poverty Act, one of the last Labour government's (1997-2010) final pieces of legislation in England. Much has been written since about early intervention (CSJ, 2011, and Kakabadse et al, 2012) with a view that collaborative leadership projects can enable senior leaders across multi-agency teams to learn together. ALICSE is one such project, although the on-going impact of cuts to public services in England (Richardson, 2011) meant that there was no further funding to continue to run this project, what is documented here is some of the success that came out of it.

Many factors of the ALICSE project are unique, such as: having a postgraduate module alongside the work of the ALICSE programme; five universities working collaboratively; bringing senior leaders together from many different areas, and together these were clearly

helping to develop a good national reputation for it, as a programme. But being involved from the inside, a number of issues worried us: the output for the previous two cohorts had not been strong, and these people looked like they were too busy to want to complete any assessment that was given to them. Unsurprisingly, when reading through their CVs, many were already qualified to Level 7, some relatively recently, with an impressive array of Masters level qualifications including MBAs. So it was unclear how the HEI dimension added any potential value – other than its currency - for the individuals, or their employers, if they had already attained those qualifications.

The developed format for ALICSE is one of Collaborative Working: Five Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) involved in delivering the programme, and the tutorials and final assessment are up to each of the individual universities concerned. So ALICSE has a structured programme, high profile keynote speakers at each session, but no unified assessment method. Rather, it is up to the HEIs how they choose a vehicle from inside their current validated frameworks that enables the post-graduate students to gain the HEI credits that are on offer. Directors of Children's Services (DCS's) are keen where there is no Level 7 qualification in place for these to be achieved, and progression is offered for successful students on to our MA Education: Leadership and Management Pathway. But for busy graduate professionals (even those who lack in Level 7 qualifications and have the desire and motivation to achieve them) finding the time to be able to contribute effectively to such a programme for a short period is a challenge, but for the duration of an entire MA programme is a continuing challenge.

The ALICSE leadership programme is an extended development opportunity for leaders looking to develop within an integrated or more multi-agency environment. The programme previously

included four one-day events held in Nottingham over a period of several months. This enabled two cohorts to be delivered every year. The revised programme delivery, instead of over several months, ranged over an academic year: October – July. A larger single cohort rather than two smaller distinct groups. This revised format has extended use of the HEIs, with four on-campus half days being delivered in addition to the tutorials that have always taken place for the assessed components.

Both formats have utilised a range of other ‘blended learning’ opportunities such as work-based projects, placements, self and 360 evaluations, online learning and group seminars. The events have high quality keynote inputs from the region’s Directors of Children’s Services and a range of other notable speakers, such as: John West-Burnham (leadership and Social Justice), David Burnaby (Performance Outputs), Louise Morpeth (Dartington Institute).

In the final single cohort of around 90 people, individuals were senior leaders recruited from across all sectors of the children’s workforce and across the region. Participants will already have received leadership training in some form, usually from their sector-specific background, and are now keen to extend their leadership to work effectively within the more integrated environment that now exists.

The programme was for existing leaders who may be a head of service or organisation or may work in one of the children’s service ‘sectors’ eg schools, health, police, youth, third sector and now developing their leadership within an integrated children’s service environment. The recruitment guidance recommends representation from all sectors of the children’s workforce as depicted in ‘Building Brighter Futures’ (DCSF, 2007). ALICSE is for colleagues who are ambitious to improve their leadership capability beyond the scope of existing leadership

programmes. DCSs and Children's Trusts may also specifically seek to develop key individuals as part of their talent spotting and succession management strategy.

The ALICSE programme made a significant contribution to a sustainable culture leadership within children's services in East Midlands. Around 200 leaders have completed the programme. Alumni events are now being considered for these previous cohorts, in the area of Leadership Coaching. Several individuals from the cohorts have now gone on to complete full Masters in Education: Leadership and Management, as a consequence of gaining the ALICSE module and that first set of HEI credits that make university engagement seem do-able despite very busy professional senior leadership roles across public sector organizations.

One of the particularly unique aspects of ALICSE is that five local universities across the region are providing participants with support through the ALICSE programme to enable them to achieve 30 credits in children's service leadership (at postgraduate Level). The assessment can be run through any vehicle that the individual university deems is appropriate, in our case it was run through an MA Education module from the Leadership and Management Pathway, entitled: 'Principles of Leadership and Management'.

Initially, it was felt that one of the reasons for poor completion rates for the module was not that these busy professionals could not complete the work, but *because* they had already completed Level 7 qualifications. Hence, writing a 5,000 word research based essay did not add anything to their skill-set: they could produce work of that standard, and could not see the relevance of producing more work to that standard when no-one else was going to see it. Whereas, if they had to complete a locality task and write it up in a 5,000 word equivalent document that could be

presented to their peer group and line managers, then what they had learnt from conducting the locality task became far more relevant. It would not just relate to their profession, but would offer the possibility to reflect on their changing circumstances and disseminate their findings to a wider and relevant audience, in a manner where it would help the integrated leadership style that was being developed through the ALICSE programme.

The completion rate for the academic poster presentations rose to 66% from the 30% that had submitted written work on the cohort before. The Module Evaluation Form Feedback findings were: that the process of sharing and learning collaboratively at a presentation event had “really motivated me to conduct the best locality task I could, and think of ways to share my experience in an exciting and stimulating visual” (Participant C). Whereas others commented: “having never completed an academic poster before, I felt challenged and stretched in a way that made me enjoy the learning experience: it was new to me” (Participant G). The process of group presentations and the increase in dissemination that occurs here is clearly a significant factor, one busy professional said honestly, “If I hadn’t known that the course leaders and one of my line managers was going [to the presentation event] perhaps I wouldn’t have bothered, but I was really glad that I made the effort as the time to stop and think about the learning that had taken place was really valuable for me” (Participant B).

There is a real sense with Work Based Learning that there is a lack of arduousness with regard to completion if postgraduate students can engage in topics that clearly inspire them in their relativity to their work. This enables students to engage in clear, focused work that directly links - in the case of ALICSE - to their locality task and poster completion. The qualitative feedback

obtained from students suggested that the relevance of their topic to their leadership capacity and alternative focus to their day-to-day work, gave them a focus for their poster presentations. The honesty with which the cohort responded to a few questions regarding the module has meant that clearly, they are inspired to complete if they believe that they are taking part in accelerating the wider notion of integrated leadership as a consequence (McKimm et al, 2008).

With the subsequent larger ALICSE cohort, the revised format was for all 90 participants to be able to present an academic poster presentation in whatever format they choose. If it counts as their allocated HEI presentation (which it will for our MA Education students) then the ALICSE participants will have to follow a required format that meet the HEI expectations. But what ALICSE has now generated is the expectation that through a poster format - of some description - all participants will undertake a locality task, and effectively share their research evidence, with a body of interested, integrated professionals developing leadership capacity in the arena (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012).

In order to have 90 presentations to take place on one day, in one place, the presentation event was handled almost like a conference with the titles of submissions being submitted beforehand, and interested parties being able to attend with sessions they feel will be the most useful to them, in terms of developing their leadership potential and expertise. It is hoped that further one-day events like this, will push the boundaries for Leadership and Management in Integrated Children's Services that ALICSE developed a well-earned reputation for.

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