Collaboration and Partnership: *coping with choice and competition*

Let's begin with the words. They are not as unproblematic as frequent use might imply. *Collaboration* sounds like a desirable thing: easing tension and conflict; arriving at agreement; multiplying strengths; and working for the common good. Being in *partnership* also sounds desirable for similar reasons. But having the wrong partner or going into collaboration without realising that your values and interests conflict or that the balance of power disadvantages you can quickly erode self-esteem, confidence and effectiveness. That is why it has not always been good to have been called a 'collaborator'.

Nevertheless, collaboration and partnership have been themes of government education policy for many years. More than twenty five years ago the talk was of school-industry partnerships such as the Schools Curriculum Industry Partnership (SCIP). Encouragement to establish and join such partnerships was accompanied by a flurry of vocational and pre-vocational programmes and awards; publishers felt it worthwhile to commission books and journals and business kits for use in schools; grand self-important seeming projects such as the Technical, Vocational, Education Initiative (TVEI, which originally did not include the 'E' word) emerged from central government and the Manpower Services Commission; and politicians such as Sir Keith Joseph and industrialists such as Sir John Methven made speeches about how schools should respond to the needs of industry.

It seemed to me at the time that the balance of collaboration and partnership was tilted so that it was schools and colleges that were being told to make the changes, not industry. And yet it was industry and government that let us all down with such a phenomenal increase in unemployment figures that government had to make multiple alterations to the method of measurement in order to reduce them and make them appear more palatable. I worked in a school just off the once well-named Commercial Road in Liverpool. On that road there were three major factories each employing 1,500 people and a few smaller businesses amounting to 200 or more jobs. They all disappeared while local schools were being told to prepare young people for employment. I find it scarcely believable that the destruction of industries and communities carried out at that time continues to be regarded by members of the Conservative Party as an achievement to be celebrated; some people have no sense of shame. It is even more shameful that the people of the UK voted for such a government.

The lesson for educators is, I suggest, that although there are times when you have little choice but to collaborate and join a partnership it is always wise to do it knowing not only your own needs, interests and values but also those of potential partners. Otherwise, do not complain when you are blamed for failure or

regarded by history as having been complicit in the destruction of what you hold dear.

Let us also look at the words 'choice' and 'competition'. I believe that if we asked them what they wanted parents would choose to have a 'good local school'. What they are presented with instead is a confusing array of different kinds of schools for different kinds of children, some of which they have no serious chance of choosing. In fact, it is often the schools that do the choosing; so much for the idea of giving vouchers to parents; and so much for any idea of inclusive parent school partnerships.

We now have the combination of a competitive league table approach with confusingly differentiated schools for differentiated children. Simple-minded believers in the capacity of the market to bring forth the best educational choice for everyone might wish to reflect upon what gets lost when this mixture of schools (and colleges of Further Education) concentrates only upon obtaining a high league table position in order that success can be perpetuated by their ability to choose the children and young people who are most likely to keep them at the top.

Running repairs and hot air balloons

From time-to-time, however, politicians can become frightened by criticism that the curriculum no longer encourages, for example, *creativity*. When that happened in England they turned creativity into a dedicated, measurable, project rather than a normal part of what happens when people learn: it was put back into the curriculum but in a manner somewhat artificial (more money for consultants). What next we might wonder?

In fact, government constantly intervenes to make running repairs to this presumptive competitive 'lets beat everyone else to the top' market in education. It has to because competition eventually disadvantages too many 'consumers' and this becomes embarrassing for government. Consumers are voters.

You may remember that old hot air balloon game in which decisions have to be made about who or what to throw out of the basket in order to remain above ground. League table winners (schools, F.E. colleges and universities) have often jettisoned much of value in order to rise: which bit of the curriculum shall we throw out next? Or which group of students are keeping us down; special needs perhaps? Out they go until government realises that something has to be done to prevent a re-election damaging public outcry.

We are all of us really partners with government; not by any stretch of the imagination dominant partners (mostly we are subservient) but, nevertheless, we live off each other. When I worked for a Local Education Authority (LEA) there

was often talk that our days were numbered. But it seemed to me that although we could expect change and a diminution of our capacity for independent action we would never be abolished because, quite simply, government would always need local partners to implement its policies or, to be more accurate and realistic, translate its policies into something workable. In that process there existed a small opportunity to insert some humanity: to re-awaken or retain ideals: to create something that a professional educator might regard as of high value. But consoling one's self with that thought can also be dangerous. Collaborating in order to mitigate the worst effects of government policy can also become the first step to being recruited as its agent. In the words of Harry (also known as Sid) Battersby, one of my inspiring colleagues in my first year of school teaching back in the sixties in Bootle, we must 'box clever'; this was his advice for dealing with 'the boss', as school senior managers and leaders were known in those days. But you cannot do that if you lack or forget values.

Imagine having engraved on your head stone for history to witness: 'Was always a compliant partner'. What an epitaph for a professional educator. What might be the reaction of visitors to the graveyard of once-upon-a-time fearlessly idealistic teachers?

And today I keep hearing the question: 'Will there still be colleges of Further Education (F.E.) in five years from now?'. I do not intend to discuss all of the detailed issues raised by this question but why would government ever contemplate abolishing a sector that has (sometimes enthusiastically) demonstrated its keenness to do what it is told to do; that is only too ready to be a willing partner of government? There may be a name change (a favourite tactic of all governments) and an alteration in governance to bring to bear the perceived interests of industry (more use of the word 'partnership' to accompany 'employability' perhaps); but someone has to deliver, or be blamed for failing to deliver, the relevant government targets. And F.E. has the advantage of being a cheap partner for government.

Meanwhile, if F.E. decides that in order to survive in a form acceptable to government it must drop, for example, its provision for special needs the social consequences will eventually be embarrassing enough for a future secretary of state to earn a legacy by re-inventing the provision under another name. While this is going on the classrooms will have been reallocated and the contracts of the teachers with the necessary experience and expertise will have been terminated so it will be expensive to rebuild the provision. Legacies are usually expensive for someone.

For the moment special needs continues to attract grant so it is relatively safe. But I can imagine some form of public-private (so-called 'social') partnership delivering a hived-off (probably more expensive and certainly less democratically accountable) special needs service in the future. This would remove a heavy weight dragging down the results of F.E.

Who would worry about any social cost? Government would still be combining the words 'collaboration' and 'competition' without any sense of unease.

Integration and malintegration

For years I have found the work of Fred Riggs to be useful for generating and testing my own ideas about collaboration and partnership. In *Prismatic Society* (note ref) he has a useful way of helping us to see how partnerships can operate to the benefit of all and also how they can go wrong. My interpretation (perhaps an over simplification) of what he writes is that a first or preliminary analysis of society can reveal a number of different components such as church, army, bureaucracy, industry, education and so on. It is possible for these components to combine in the general interest (not necessarily a good thing when the general interest becomes malevolently interpreted). It is also possible that one component becomes dominant and binds the others to its own interest or convinces them that its particular interest is the same as the general interest. In this state society may be seen to be integrated but if we look more closely we can see that it is really malintegrated. It may look like a fair and equal relationship between partners but it is not. The Marxist point (usually attributed to Engels) about false consciousness comes to mind. We can believe that we are willing and equal partners but there is a good chance that if we engage in some critical examination we shall discover that we are not: we serve the interests of others.

There is also a disappointingly good chance that when we have discovered the true nature of the relationships in which we participate we shall not wish to change them: too much trouble.

One of my recent professional disappointments was to carry out an analysis of professional learning needs with school teachers who were surprised to discover that by participating in a masters degree programme they were allowed to have needs that were not simply those defined by their school. Why surprised?

This situation becomes worse when even the people who have the responsibility to arrange things do not really know what is going on. For far too many years I believed that someone, somewhere, really knew what they were doing: that a rational plan existed and that my only problem was that I was insufficiently clever to understand it. If ageing has brought any benefit to me it is that as the years go by I have shed more and more of my trust in the wisdom of 'the powers that be' and become more and more convinced that they can persuade themselves to believe anything that suits them. Weapons of mass destruction anyone?

I suppose that the answer is to change or capture the mind of government; but that is not easy to do by means of rational argument. For one thing, there are too many advisers, think tanks, consultancies and special interest groups trying to

influence government; and politicians have come to believe that they must not offend a powerful and prejudicial press. The last Tory Prime Minister to believe in anything approaching a fair distribution of wealth, Harold Macmillan, said that 'events, dear boy, events' are what blow government off course and force it to make unforeseen changes. Picking your policies in response to pressure and the advice of consultants and as a consequence acquiring contradictory plans without realising that you have has the same effect because it sets up a kind of self-created policy oscillation that absorbs productive energy: you can't go forward so easily if you are also going from side to side. You blow yourself off course.

This is why government has to reconcile its contradictory simultaneous belief in collaboration and competition: no matter how apparently impossible may be the holding of two opposing views political life has to go on. There is little limit to our ability to accept the consequent compromises and to put to one side any idea that policy should be subject to critical examination. As a result we are now presented with the notion that so-called 'successful schools' (the competition winners) will lead federations that include others that have not climbed above the average and have, therefore, been labelled 'failing schools' (they lost the competition). The idea is that the spurious achievement of success, based upon a misunderstanding of the law of averages, will rub off on each federation and all schools shall collaborate and be above average together.

What professional educators are being required to do, however, is to keep quiet and not to ask awkward questions about what constitutes success and how it might have been arrived at.

Those head teachers who have long fantasised that they are really Richard Branson running a large and diverse conglomerate will jump at the chance to pose as a captain of industry. The latest BMW is already on order. At one time it was assembly, speech day and sports day that provided the biggest stage for a headteacher. In future it will be the annual meeting of shareholders.

What should professional learning partnerships look like?

How about some basic principles? Well, at least they can be starters for discussion.

I believe that professional learning partnerships should:

1. establish their purposes and key concerns;

2. be clear about their scope;

3. support, recognise, record and acknowledge the professional learning of teachers and related professionals;

4. support school and college-based provision, management and ownership of professional learning;

5. enable all members to critically examine and demonstrate the quality and impact of their plans for professional learning;

6. give meaning to school and college effectiveness and improvement;

7. encourage professional learning that is fair, positive and inclusive; and

8. make appropriate links with initial teacher education and research.

The act of joining a professional learning partnership implies a commitment by all parties to its purposes, concerns and values and a mutual interest in continuous improvement. Partnerships should also, therefore:

9. provide opportunity for all members or stakeholders to build joint understanding of the appropriateness of plans for professional learning, their delivery, modes of learning, modes of assessment and modes of evaluation for impact;

10. have a clear and resilient structure, a lack of confusion concerning the functions of its component parts and a shared understanding of its processes so that key players in the partnership can have a clear idea of how they relate to one another; and

11. be clear about who does what.

It could be useful to have a code of practice designed to fulfil the purpose of the partnership. Leaders of professional learning in schools and colleges should, therefore:

12. be provided with an induction programme and become part of a community that will play a key role in professional learning, its accreditation and its links with, for example, the GTC(E)'s Teacher Learning Academy, with programmes from the National College for School Leadership, with government initiatives such as the National Strategies and probably lots more.

Concepts and critical questions

1. Improvement

What does 'improvement' mean? Who gets to define it? What might it look like if you defined it? Might a restricted definition also restrict and diminish professional learning?

How do you persuade a partnership to listen to your need to work on improving or achieving outcomes chosen by you?

Will you have a chance to influence the design and subject matter of partnership plans for professional learning so that they are professionally useful to you?

2. Quality assurance

If quality control means that you only have to think about quality when you get to the end of a process of learning and quality assurance means that you have to think about quality at all stages what are the implications for a professional learning partnership?

If quality assurance and the evaluation of impact are closely intertwined must partnerships take into account identification and analysis of need, context and baseline?

Is evaluation by and on behalf of a professional learning partnership something that has to be passed at a particular level or is it about understanding a starting point and making good, critical sense of what happens during the learning of professional educators?

Is quality assurance and evaluation simply about the number of people taking part and who have, for example, obtained an award or is it about what they have learned and what that means for them and their school?

3. Evidence and research

How would you know that something was evidence of or for something? What does it look like? Is it strong or weak? Is it significant or insignificant? Has it been tested? Where did it come from? Is it like anything else that you know? How much of a bet would you place on it? If it is not evidence of one thing might it be evidence of something else and if so is that important?

Would the partnership be interested, for example, in helping a school to analyse its masses of data on assessment?

Would it be possible to do this sort of thing as a collaborative research project that could benefit the whole school?

What kinds of research methods are we talking about here?

Are we trying to turn teachers into university researchers or are we trying to enhance their professionalism?

4. Professional learning needs

Will the partnership strike a balance between the needs of a school or college and the individuals working in it?

Are there any limits to or controls upon the kinds of professional needs teachers are allowed to have?

What happens if schools, colleges and teachers do not satisfy their needs? Can you still learn something valuable from the process of trying?

5. Access

Are the venues and timetables sufficiently flexible for you?

What are the possibilities of school-based work?

Will teachers from different schools be able to work together?

Sometimes educational theory and methodology can look very daunting so will it be made accessible to participants?

6. Multi accreditation

Will the partnership make links between different professional learning programmes in order to make sense of complex accreditation opportunities?

7. Prioritising

Has the partnership already decided to concentrate upon particular national priorities or can it be persuaded to focus upon priorities useful to your school?

How flexible is the partnership?

Is it willing to talk about local and school priorities?