Integrating Responses to Homelessness: The Contribution of Participatory Action Research

Dr Phil Crane, Senior Lecturer, Social Work and Human Services, Faculty of Health, Queensland University of Technology

‘joined up’ service delivery, ‘joined-up’ policy, no wrong door, better linkages between mainstream and specialist services, a focus on outcomes, client-centered approaches … integration can mean many things. Derived from systems thinking, the concept of integration assumes various ‘bits’ of something, in this case responses to homelessness, inter-relate and should be connected in particular ways.

The Australian context has seen some aspects of integration explicitly pursued, usually those which fit with dominant policy, program management and service delivery assumptions. Participatory Action Research (PAR) and other forms of collaborative inquiry are increasingly being utilised as process technologies to foster locally responsive and integrated approaches to human services delivery.

These can contribute to better articulation between policy, contract management, service system infrastructure and service delivery. They can also play a role in bridging between specialist homelessness services and other parties essential to the prevention of homelessness, most notably what in *The Road Home* is referred to as mainstream services.

Whilst top down approaches to integration can be rolled out, and trialled models of service delivery may be positively evaluated to justify scaling up, the contribution of bottom up collaborative inquiry processes should not be underestimated.

The experience of the Reconnect program suggests that embedding inquiry processes into service delivery, together with the endorsement of Reconnect funded services and practitioners to play a ‘bridging’ role at the community level, is a necessary combination to achieve responsive, outcomes-oriented support. This has significant implications for how we think about some aspects of integration.

The White Paper and some writers conceptualise the link between mainstream and specialist homelessness services as ‘an interface’ where the goal is to have these ‘work better together’ and where mainstream services play an increased role in the prevention of homelessness. On the other hand institutions which remove people from community contexts such as the justice system (prisons), child protection and mental health systems are being challenged to address the nexus between themselves and homelessness. To be even moderately successful will require significant change to policies and practices at a number of levels. Better integration in both policy and service delivery is seen as the key strategy.

A critical foundation for this is how we conceptualise the relationship between what can be broadly termed mainstream services, specialist homelessness services and coercive state intervention. This paper focuses on the first two of these.

Certainly specialist homelessness services have developed a wide range of partnerships and relationships. For example various specialist youth accommodation services and schools have developed specific strategies in partnership to support independent students. Yet there are often significant constraints on the extent to which mainstream services (and to some extent specialist homelessness services) will adopt an early intervention frame. It is generally not what either they or specialist services are principally funded or rewarded for doing.

In respect of youth homelessness the role of early intervention has been located in various ‘in between’ locations, sometimes in a whole program (such as Reconnect services), sometimes in specialist homelessness services (such as SAAP services), and sometimes in or associated with mainstream services themselves (school based and school focused early intervention).

Critical in all of these has been their role as ‘bridging’ across multiple parties who may variously support a young person to avoid or exit homelessness early on. This best occurs on two interrelated levels — a direct practice level in respect of specific young people and can be seen as a form of case management (see Gronda 2008), and a community capacity building level which aims to facilitate the development of awareness and responsiveness in mainstream locations (see RPR 2003). As well as contributing to early intervention such capacity building can provide support for broader prevention initiatives having positive effect at the institutional level.

So rather than see mainstream and specialist services as simply interfacing, with the levers for better integration being policy and organisational arrangements (hubs, one-stop shops, committees) we need to also examine how we build bridges between mainstream and specialist services.

In respect of early intervention there is a need to understand that early intervention requires a particular type of ‘space’. This is challenging to create and sustain in amongst tightly output oriented funding structures. To be able to undertake ‘good’ early intervention practice requires the explicit location of an early intervention interest within key mainstream services, as well as dedicated early intervention services to bridge between mainstream services, specialist homelessness services, state intervention institutions, and the broader community.

Without these it is no-one’s job to undertake the integrative across systems work necessary at the local level. In respect of specialist homelessness services *The Road Home* indicates advanced practitioner positions as the drivers of integration (p.x).

Critical to early intervention will be the capacity of the integrative effort to be focused on reducing homelessness and being able to do this using appropriate language and processes. For example, it is apparent that as the focus shifts to early intervention, those in need of support do not generally identify themselves as at risk of homelessness, in part a product of the highly negative stereotyping that exists around homeless people. Being able to ‘bridge’ is not only necessary organisationally but also in respect of cultural norms and practice language.

Regardless of the functional mechanisms used to progress integration there is a need to develop local ways of practicing which utilise the particular government, organisational, workforce, and community resources potentially available. This is necessary regardless of how well specified the policy environment is.

Indeed, part of the policy specification should be an obligation for those funded in respect of homelessness to proactively inquire into what will be effective at the local or community level (including communities of interest).

Given the limited formal authority that exists between various local/community parties who can contribute to the prevention of homelessness this needs to be inquiry oriented and of a facilitative and participatory style.

Yet it also needs to be very purposeful with a clear overall focus on homelessness, whilst validating the many factors that may make people vulnerable and the breadth of contributions differently located parties can legitimately make to this effort. This is where PAR provides a process framework and language for various parties to join around.

What is participatory action research? Essentially it is purposeful inquiry into practice that actively involves those who are affected by the question asked. Action research questions are typically phrased in terms of ‘how would we …?’ or “what would it take …?”. Observing and reflecting on a
An extended PAR cycle

**Figure 1**

**Observe**
- What is happening in our practice context?

**Act**
- Do it!
- How can we improve it?

**Plan**
- What will we try together?

**Plan again**
- How can we improve it?

**Reflect**
- How do we interpret this?
- Analyse, share and check

**Conclude**
- Share publicly?

**Observe**
- What happened?

Fourthly, many people’s issues at the early stages of homelessness manifestation do not require high resource intensive service system responses which bring with them issues of stigma and act as a strong disincentive to engagement with assistance. Engagement and involvement of mainstream supports and resources are often highly appropriate.

Flatau et al. cite Konrad’s (1996) *Strength of Integration Continuum* which begins with fragmented or independent service delivery undertaken by autonomous agencies, moving towards full strength ‘integration’.

Levels of interaction are platformed from information sharing and communication between independent agencies, to inter-agency cooperation and coordination revolving around loose arrangements such as reciprocal client referral, to collaboration between agencies to achieve a common goal or outcome and may involve activities such as partnerships with written agreements, cross-training and shared information systems. PAR can provide a process to develop these forms of integration.

What of vertical as well as horizontal integration? There has been growing interest in how the PAR undertaken by agencies can feed into policy processes. This is both desirable and does occur at times. However, a systematic and supported approach is necessary to realise more of this potential, one which can be characterised as the establishment of an action research system (Crane and O’Regan 2010) where services are actively supported to develop, share and publish the action research they play a lead role in.

In developing approaches to integration it is important to strike a balance between top down models and ones which foster local engagement, inquiry and capacity building. Distinguishing common requirements that require policy and scaled up institutional arrangements, from important points of local, cultural and contextual differentiation is key to this.

Processes are needed that foster local barriers to be identified and either addressed or referred to policy levels for attention. A mix of evidence types are needed from traditional notions of ‘gold standard’ empirical research to the action researched understandings and insights of homeless and vulnerable people and those who work most closely with them. Embedding processes and roles that support action inquiry and bridge across service types are essential elements of the integration challenge.


Other references can be found on-line at the Parity website.