

*Collaborative Relations and Service Delivery of Relationship Education Programs in
Australia*

Elizabeth van Acker
Department of Politics and Public Policy
Griffith University
Nathan Qld 4111
Phone 07 373 57696
Fax 07 373 57737
Email E.vanacker@griffith.edu.au

Stream Six: Partnerships, Collaborative Relations and Enhanced Capacities in Policy-Making

The federal government promotes marriage and relationships and has recently increased its spending on relationship education programs. This is a preventative measure in response to reducing the risk of marital breakdowns. The governance of relationship education policies encourages various agencies and service providers to network and engage in joint activities and ventures. Policy rhetoric acknowledges the importance of ‘integration’, ‘partnerships’, ‘collaboration’ and ‘networking’, terms which pervade much of the policy literature. There is, however, very little empirical study about agency collaboration around the issue of strengthening marriage and relationships.

The paper provides a distinctive investigation of government departments, church and community groups working to develop and implement relationship education programs. It offers preliminary findings of service delivery networks to ascertain how public and private actors collaborate and influence policy-making. Service providers cater for local needs with a diverse range of client demands, values and learning approaches. Apart from handling this complex diversity, the challenge is that different agencies compete for scarce resources, making it difficult to collaborate. Despite this competitiveness, service providers do work in partnership, which suggests that there may be some potential for capacity building at the community level.

Introduction

New public private relationships have been developing in line with new public management. Some say that this results in more collaborative partnerships leading to a new form of governance. This paper examines partnerships between actors involved in marriage and relationship education. It briefly sets out the history of relations between government and the community and voluntary sectors, before discussing current policies and challenges. It argues that while loose networks exist between service providers and government departments, it is the networks between the locally based service providers that offer potential for capacity building. One of the limitations, however, is that allocating resources is a crucial element in policy making which has a detrimental effect on collaboration because agencies compete for resources. Government inquiries and reviews, reports from the service providers and interviews I conducted highlight the success and tensions faced by a variety of stakeholders.¹ Marriage educators have developed partnerships, sustaining networks across the country, but are often under-resourced and torn between the needs of funding agencies and the needs of clients. They are forced to compete for scarce funds and tenders, spending too much time on administrative requirements. Consequently, there are difficulties concerning implementation because policy capacity and resources are dispersed in numerous organisations that deliver marriage and relationship education programs.

Policy Networks and Collaboration

The theories of policy networks are numerous with many different versions and interpretations (Atkinson and Coleman, 1992, Rhodes and Marsh, 1992, Marsh and Smith, 2000). The work of Rhodes (1997) is often cited. He perceives 'policy community' as a specific kind of network and networks as linking policy communities to government and to each other. The debate about the merits of policy network types continues (and will not be rehearsed here). Although the term is difficult to define, it is useful in understanding the nature of the partnerships that shape relationship education policies. Considine's call for avoiding a particular position regarding networks is appropriate; he views them as 'a collective noun for different potential means of collaboration among actors' (2005, p. 3). Broadly speaking, these actors share an interest in policy improvement. In my example, I consider policy networks as a group of actors including government agencies, peak bodies and service providers. Networks link a range of players who form partnerships and collaborate to varying degrees. At the wider level, the churches, legal courts, secular groups, migrant groups, step families, domestic violence and child support agencies are part of the mix. Some service providers, especially those under the Industry Representative Bodies (IRBs) umbrella, may have contact with bureaucrats and politicians, but most of the smaller service deliverers do not. However, I suggest that an effective 'service network' operates within the particular sector focusing on marriage and relationship education. This type of network is particularly relevant for marriage and relationship education at a time when

[post] modern societies are far more internally diverse, so that old institutions of family, church and state can no longer express the needs and demands of the many identities and geographic interests. Networks

¹ I interviewed various actors between 2003 and 2006 in Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra. This involved participants from FaCS, the three IRBs and non-affiliated service providers.

provide the necessary links and information flows for bringing these together into forms of joint action (Considine, 2005, p. 4).

The organisation and the power of the network may influence policy programs and implementation, suggesting that governance requires a degree of cooperation and interaction between the public and nonprofit sectors.

The claim that networks are generating new forms of governance has recently been receiving some attention. For example, Considine (2005) argues that there are three domains in which links can influence policy and program development: inter-organisational networks; individuals who have organisational roles and inter-agency networks. The third domain, which Considine labels as 'inter-agency networks' or 'service networks' seems suitable in the area of marriage and relationship support, because it relates to ways in which agents cooperate in the provision of a common program or service. These networks, he argues, are distinctive in two ways:

First, they generally focus upon the needs of a particular class of clients or customers whose characteristics provide the main source of coherence in this network. Second, while there may be policy implications in the way such service networks operate, their participants do not necessarily view themselves as policy makers and their work will often tend to be less defined by larger corporate strategies (Considine, 2005, p. 9).

This may in fact prove quite influential as it adopts a 'joined-up' strategy to co-manage and integrate services.

The arrangements contribute to better governance because service delivery networks develop connections through which decisions get made and work gets done.

There is potential capacity to influence policy and interact with each other to achieve their goals of strengthening marriage and relationships. Therefore, networks offer the opportunity for capacity building as a collaborative process between government and the community, with each group acknowledging their roles and responsibilities (Cuthill, 2005, p. 65). However, they also require adequate resources and support to be effective and to meet outcomes that assist their clients.

Government Policies and Relationship Education

Marriage is under pressure, some say in crisis (Waite and Gallagher, 2000), as marriage rates decline and divorce rates are high. Hence the federal government has been targeting marriage beyond regulating it as a legal institution, with the goal of reducing the risk of relationship breakdowns and divorce. These preventative measures and strategies, however, are not a new policy development. Public funding of marriage education has occurred (albeit in small amounts) since the 1940s when the churches focused on preventing marriage breakdown. Courses were eventually offered in every capital city and many provincial centres. Concurrently, government sponsored marriage guidance and counselling services were expanding. Due to public recognition of the value of these services and financial assistance, organisations began using professionally trained staff for counselling and tutoring couples intending to marry (Harris *et al.*, 1992, p. 11). The Family Services Program established in the 1960s provided government funding for marriage education. In fact this program was an aspect of national family policy which included taxation and a universal health scheme (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs (HRSCLCA), 1998, p. 77). Grants went to Christian churches and secular organisations offering marriage counselling. The program involved three main areas: preventive programs

offering services such as marriage preparation and family skills training and parenting; programs such as marriage counselling to support marriage where problems had arisen; and programs aimed at harmonious separation offered via Family Court counselling and family mediation (HRSLCA, 1998). Accordingly, a continuing partnership developed between the government and community groups.

When the Liberal National Coalition government came to power in 1996, it was concerned about the consequences of marriage breakdown and the escalating rates of divorce. Accordingly, it established an inquiry to examine aspects of family services and the role of governments in providing them. The HRSLCA produced its report *To Have and to Hold: Strategies to Strengthen Marriage and Relationships* in 1998. The report recommended educational programs for couples intending to marry, suggesting that preventative strategies were a pragmatic way of coaching couples in developing healthy, stable relationships. Hence, the government steadily increased its spending on family relationship education, a sub-program of its Family Relationship Services Program (FRSP) to approximately \$4 million annually in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This modest amount funds approximately 100 community organizations in approximately 400 locations to deliver marriage and relationship services to more than 135,000 clients each year (Department of FaCS, 2003, p. 3).

The recent family law reform package addresses concerns raised in the House of Representative Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs report *Every Picture Tells a Story* (2003). The \$397 million package includes changes to the law and courts, with the aim of developing practical measures to resolve disputes and to consider what is in the best interests of children whose parents are separating. As part of the federal government's initiatives, it is establishing 65 Family Relationship Centres (FRCs) with the goal of providing mediation, counselling and dispute resolution services for separating couples. Mothers and fathers will receive assistance in developing a viable parenting plan to negotiate the best outcomes for their children. In addition, a toll-free telephone information and advice line and a new website will help families improve their relationships or prevent separation. More funding is also available for early intervention and skills development to expand marriage education services (Attorney-General's Department, 2005). Increases in funding should result in more resources for service delivery, although, as we will see below, service providers have been struggling up till now.

Service Deliverers

Providers of various programs find it difficult to describe and classify their services using tightly defined criteria. As Simons and Parker (2002) found in their study, relationship education activities can be offered as part of a range of social and welfare services delivered by community-based health care facilities, hospitals, schools, adult and community education organisations, juvenile justice and corrections facilities, hospitals, youth services, religious and specific cultural groups. The defence forces, employee assistance programs, maternal and child health centres and neighbourhood and community centres also use them. Embedded programs highlight the potential for existing providers to expand their work by forming collaborative partnerships with agencies working in related areas such as health and aged care.

Relationship education *per se* is offered via three IRBs which provide family relationship services: Family Services Australia (FSA) which includes Anglican Church groups, Catholic Welfare Australia (CWA) and Relationships Australia (RA), which is not aligned to any religious agency. These IRBs were established as representative bodies in the 1990s, serving as a conduit between government and member organisations. Funded and administered by the Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS)² and Attorney General's Department (AGD), they provide 'representational and advocacy services to FRSP providers' and 'advice on matters significant to program policy and administration' (FaCS, 2003, p. 4). Accredited agencies delivering marriage programs are diverse in size, location and income. Many are funded under the FRSP umbrella, operating on a fee for service basis, but federal government subsidies allow the service providers to charge inexpensive fees. Some agencies receive funding from state governments, churches and other benefactors. Some are linked to community legal centres, or are part of independent community organisations or in Church networks.

IRBs incorporate church-based and church-affiliated providers as well as secular organisations which may share many similarities in relation to the structure and content of relationship education service activities. However, the different agencies have developed 'niche' markets to service particular target groups and geographical locales (Simons and Parker 2002). RA argues that it is important to offer people access to services that are not affiliated with a religious organisation (Relationships Australia, 2003, p. 12). It acknowledges that there are some inherent benefits in collaborating with other service provider organisations, but claims that this 'expectation has some limitations and should not jeopardise healthy diversity among provider organisations and the capacity of the Program to offer choices to clients' (Relationships Australia, 2003, p. 13). Nonetheless, RA does network with other service providers. Similarly, FSA sees its membership base as more diverse and fluid than RA's and CWA's, but works with the sector (2006, p. 9). One of the challenges is that marriage and relationship education is only a small part of what the IRBs do. Their major functions include counselling, mediation, parenting support, aged care and dispute resolution, so the IRBs have insufficient time or resources necessary to specifically lobby for relationship education.

Networking and Collaborative Relations

A recent *Review of the FRSP* (Urbis Key Young, 2004) examined the diverse network of service providers and suggested that there was scope and need to strengthen the FRSP sector through increased contact, consultation and co-operation among funded agencies and among the three IRBs. It recommended measures to promote and support inter-agency activity such as joint training, cross-agency practitioner workshops, improved sharing of information and resources and joint research projects. The major problems include inadequate funding and limited coverage, fragmentation of services by agency and location, inadequate internal linkages with other relevant programs and services provided by the states and territories, by other Commonwealth agencies and by FaCS itself (Urbis Key Young, 2004, xiv).

The review also found that the FRSP suffered from lack of direct engagement between program managers and service providers. This could be explained by rapid turnover of program management personnel in Canberra and lack of funds to allow managers to visit agencies and maintain a clear understanding of their work and the challenges they face (Urbis Key Young, 2004, xii-xiii). Nonetheless, the Review acknowledged that while the

² FaCS now FaCSIA includes Indigenous Affairs in its portfolio.

sector is fairly divided at the broader agency level, there is more cooperation and dialogue at practitioner level (Urbis Key Young, 2004, p. 82). For example, in a number of localities some work for two or more FRSP agencies on a sessional basis and expertise and learning are shared in this way. CWA (2003, p. 20) argues that if services have been unavailable, organisations have found ways to fill the gap. Advocacy, mentoring, partnerships and seeding are all part of the process. CWA contends that partnership is a better model than integration, with the emphasis on cooperation, collaboration and an appreciation of each other's expertise.

The *Review of the FRSP* found that many agencies expressed some reluctance and hesitancy about working too closely with other FRSP providers in their locality. Partnerships with other FRSP funded agencies tended to be very fraught. While they were encouraged by FaCS and AGD to 'join forces', it was usually a matter of splitting an already small budget in two and bearing the extra costs of a joint approach with uncertainty about what the other party would ultimately deliver. Therefore, a 'marriage of forces' brings its own costs and 'small money partnerships' were usually perceived as a bad investment. Further 'some agencies mix better than others'; a partnership between two secular organisations, for example, may work better than a secular/religious-based partnership (Urbis Key Young, 2004, 80).

Turning to the more specific area of relationship education, I interviewed several educators and trainers who confirmed CWA's analysis about the value of collaboration. CWA champions the work undertaken by the Catholic Society for Marriage Education (CSME). Many educators who work for agencies attached to the CSME are also members of the Marriage and Relationship Education Association of Australia (MAREAA) a national professional association that brings practitioners together. The two bodies work closely, lobbying government, sharing information, participating in a biennial conference and producing a national magazine. Collaboration occurs on a regular basis between marriage educators, resulting in important contributions to the goal of improving client outcomes. For example, people from different agencies are on the Advisory Board of MAREAA and assist in organising its national conference. Educators have worked together (and with government) to develop competency standards and a qualifications framework, as well as new training resources and online content. Others frequently share materials: 'we swap information and teaching manuals and review classes' (personal interview, 2006). However, from a more structural perspective, an important issue for MAREAA is how to link government into the specific network on a grand scale. Educators argued that networking should not just be happening by the people on the ground, and that the government was not taking a leadership role. In 2003, a service deliverer explained 'this is difficult enough at state level, let alone at the national level' (personal interview). Three years later, similar issues were raised by another agency representative. She said,

Networking is fraught. Governments don't fund networking. It is expensive and underfunded. Networks work in spite of rather than because of what governments do. We network among ourselves (personal interview, 2006).

Another stakeholder (personal interview, 2005) noted that 'there is vast competition for money. RA is the largest organisation and gets the most; the Catholics have an extensive, informal networking system as well as small parish programs. The FSA is in danger of imploding on itself and people are not joining up'. She went on to say that 'the government opposes the IRBs and supports individual providers. This is a way of beating down the price. It may establish for-profit organisations with the FRCs and build community and legal networks'. Time will

tell if this scenario is implemented. In the meantime, these various comments illustrate that while there are problems in collaborating at the wider structural levels of the FRSP, service deliverers working on relationship education do collaborate with effective results.³

Accountability

Government funded agencies commonly endure the compliance requirements of accountability. This is the case in my examples, where the government departments control not only the funding but the accountability mechanism. From the government's perspective, accountability and transparency requires service providers to demonstrate how they have used public funds. The Review of FRSP notes that FaCSLink gathers quantitative data, but agencies see this as inadequate because the data measure the number of clients an agency sees. This does not reflect the complexity of the work undertaken nor recognise the number of hours staff spend in activities such as networking and collaboration, administration, promotion and training (Urbis Key Young, 2004, p. 162). This was a common complaint evident in my interviews. A FaCS representative acknowledged that the culture within her Department has a narrow focus, with a need for 'credibility and to define outputs. Report real work back to FaCS. Within the Department, marriage education is the fluffy stuff – it's easy to sideline' (personal interview, 2003). In 2003, she said that FaCS wanted the service providers to define the process, measure outputs and outcomes and to provide qualitative information, quotes for the Minister, and accounts of people's stories. The service providers responded that there were plenty of stories, but that it would be difficult to measure outcomes in ways that bureaucrats wanted. One educator said 'what we do is difficult to measure, if we have a 40 minute session with a client, we have to fill out two forms for FaCS' (personal interview, 2003). This was labour intensive and they did not have sufficient time or adequate resources to undertake this with every client. Listening to the responses, it became clear to me that there was a dilemma for both sides. FaCS was relying on the agencies to maintain accountability requirements, but the service providers found this difficult because they were understaffed and underfunded. Moreover, different agencies experienced different reporting requirements. An FSA spokesperson suggested that it was necessary to streamline administrative requirements because 'sometimes people had to acquit funds back to three different programs. Plus accreditation for different professions needs different data and reports' (personal interview, 2005).

While the FaCS representative requested 'people's stories', inevitably results get translated into quantifiable figures. CWA (2003) argues that the government requires accountability and results in formats that do not keep pace with cutting edge practice. One of the service providers agreed with this viewpoint, stating that FaCS 'wants names and addresses and whether people turned up, not qualitative data' (personal interview, 2006). In addition,

³ A recent collaborative development is the establishment of a reference group to examine sub-programs within the FRSP which are merging partly because of the changes to the wider FRSP and because of the establishment of the FRCs. The role of this group is to provide advice to government about policies and programs which strengthen family relationships. Apart from FaCS and AGD, members of this group include representatives from CSME and MAREAA, the Australian Federation of Civil Celebrants, the IRBs and the research community.

CWA notes that current FRSP data collection methods fail to give credit to media work. This work becomes unattractive as it requires extra effort to develop expertise in the new mediums and then further effort in persuading the funders that this is a legitimate use of funds. Consequently, the innovators in the field are in a constant state of anxiety and risk is borne by the community organisation (2003, p. 8-9). CWA praises the ‘outstanding’ labours of CSME and MAREAA, but notes that:

In fact the excellent development of the Family Relationships Education program nationally runs on the passion and commitment of the people involved. It is testimony to their tenacity and dedication that such enormous results have been achieved for so long with so few resources (CWA, 2003, p. 16).

For too long, CWA contends, gains from this subprogram have run on a deficit-funding model.

Competitive tendering

The *Review of the FRSP* (Urbis Key Young, 2004, p. 80-81) suggested that a competitive tendering environment had detrimental effects, leading to non-collaboration. There were concerns about which agency takes on legal liability for any joint project and about how management problems are dealt with.⁴ Previous attempts at collaboration had achieved limited outcomes for the effort involved and/or had resulted in one agency taking on most of the responsibility for the venture. There were also uncertainties about the quality, approach and/or the culture of other FRSP agencies, therefore agencies preferred to minimise risks by avoiding ventures that might prove to be problematic.⁵

CWA (2003, p. 23) acknowledges that competitive funding introduces an element of wariness into the FRSP sector and inhibits the exchanging information. Sharing of innovative practices is the big casualty. Competitive tendering leads to reduced service delivery, because of the complex requirements of government contracts. CWA disputes the argument that competitive tendering has to occur to make it fair to all organisations. It observes that competitive tendering favours

the best tender writer rather than the best service provider. Given that submission writing is a growing speciality, quite expensive to buy, or very time intensive if done by in-house staff, and given that for any pocket of money, up to ten organisations can be competing, this constitutes a substantial exiting of funds away from service delivery (2003, p. 23).

Although collaboration between FRSP funded services occurs, CWA clarifies that the lead organisation administering a program irrespective of the initial collaborative arrangements, generally funds that program. Thus, most lead agencies are rarely fully recompensed for their contribution (CWA, 2003, p. 24).

⁴ This will be a challenge for the recently established FRCs.

⁵ Even at the level of cross-referring clients, barriers exist between some agencies.

Several reported they were reluctant to refer clients to some other FRSP services due to a perception that the quality of the service provided was not high or did not meet the needs of their clients. Moreover, clients prefer to stay with the service ‘they know and trust’ or resist being referred from a secular to a church-based organization (or vice versa) (Urbis Key Young, 2004, p. 81).

According to Kerin, a previous CSME President, concerning relationship education in particular, the growing dependence on government funding had placed the field in an awkward position. It is true that the injection of government funds had enabled much to be achieved, but it had also changed the environment and not just for the funded agencies. Creative writing was a sought after skill as agencies with some or all volunteer staff set about applying for funding for programs of proven value, but which had to [be] dressed up to look innovative, in a climate that had now attracted the interest of fully professional and even commercial agencies (Kerin, undated, p. 4-5).

My interviews demonstrated that having to compete for funds was complicated for service providers who worked well together. As one educator put it, 'we have to go through a competitive tendering process which is difficult. It makes it difficult to go into a joint service' (personal interview, 2003). Another educator claimed that, 'to keep an edge, some information can't be shared. This affects trust and learning exchange' (personal interview, 2003). It created tensions between organisations which usually worked cooperatively. Another had a different response, 'no one begrudges money going to another organization because they'll do it well, we're devastated if others lose money. There's no envy' (personal interview, 2003).

The various findings from the *Review of the FRSP*, reports from the IRBs and my interviews suggest that there are challenges for those actors seeking to improve collaboration, for instance in meeting accountability requirements and the competitive tendering process. Some of the agencies rely on volunteers and resources are overstretched. Nevertheless, some networks have developed and could be nurtured through the new development of a performance management framework. The *Review of the FRSP* recommended the development of a comprehensive and outcome focused performance framework. This is currently under way, with the important goal of using a partnership approach to program development (RPR Consulting, 2006, p. 5). This entails activities such as consultations and one day forums with the IRBs and service providers and data modelling workshops with the aim of developing criteria to judge the framework's success. It is anticipated that information about services and the FRSP as a whole will be not only useful in performance monitoring but could contribute to program evaluation and research (RPR Consulting, 2006, p. 5). Nevertheless, as I have indicated, different actors are currently maintaining partnerships at the service delivery level, interacting regularly and sharing a high level of commitment to relationship education programs.

Conclusions

The concept of policy networks has been criticised for its descriptive limitations and assessed as simply classification. This disregards the possibility of highlighting the structure and the dynamics of network relationships and of explaining how collaboration contributes to policy outcomes. The underlying premise of the policy community/network approach is that it is in these decentralized and more or less coordinated interactions between state and societal actors that policy making unfolds. The example of marriage and relationship education provides an empirically compelling description of network collaboration. I suggest that no single policy network approach is useful for my study and that both structural and interpersonal factors need to be considered. Networks

operate as structural linkages between public and private actors, between non-government agencies amongst themselves and between individuals.

By identifying the actors in the policy networks focusing on marriage and relationship education, the important issues within it, and the nature of interactions between these actors, we can gain understanding of why we get the services we do. Network collaboration which formed around relationship education reveals how stakeholders work together in a difficult environment and attempt to deal with government policies. There is potential to develop better links with government departments and other agencies, working to maximise resources and the range of available services. A key argument of my paper is that governments and service providers are reliant on each other for different resources, particularly as policy making has become more complex, specialized and fragmented. Governments need the service providers' information, knowledge, cooperation and particular administrative capacity. Service providers need government funding and structural support. If these resources are readily available and shared, they can contribute to local flexibility and capacity building. Ultimately, partnerships can offer a significant collaborative advantage and achieve the goal of improved services for clients.

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Abbreviations

- Attorney General's Department (AGD)
- Catholic Society for Marriage Education (CSME)
- Catholic Welfare Australia (CWA)
- Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS)
- Family Relationship Centres (FRCs)
- Family Relationship Services Program (FRSP)
- Family Services Australia (FSA)
- House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs (HRSC/LCA)
- Industry Representative Bodies (IRBs)
- Marriage and Relationship Education Association of Australia (MAREAA)
- Relationships Australia (RA)