

Learning in and for Multi-agency Working in Preventing Social Exclusion

Social exclusion is a complex phenomenon which threatens the well-being of individuals and their communities. The Children Act of 2004 called for practitioners from different professional backgrounds to collaborate to prevent social exclusion, working together to look across the different domains of children's lives. The intention was that they would recognise accumulated vulnerability and intervene to disrupt trajectories that lead to social exclusion. Such collaboration requires often-underestimated professional learning and shifts of identity from practitioners, and changes in the organisations that employ them.

- Current policies on the prevention of social exclusion call for practitioners who can recognise signs of vulnerability in children's life trajectories and work with other practitioners to counteract them → Inter-professional work involves being receptive to how other types of practitioner are interpreting children's trajectories and to the expertise which informs those interpretations.
- Working with children and families to prevent social exclusion calls for responsive practices and informed professional decision-making. → Inter-professional practice is an enhanced form of working which requires engagement with local systems of distributed professional expertise to support children and families.
- These responsive practices go beyond engaging with established institutional systems where professional and organisational boundaries are strong. → They make demands on organisations to enable practitioners to follow children's trajectories in fluid and responsive ways outside established organisational systems.
- Current professional training does not prepare practitioners for working outside established organisational practices. → Professional learning for interagency work involves analysing the suitability of organisational conditions for developing this form of work.

The research

We worked with practitioners such as educational psychologists, children and families workers, teachers, education welfare officers, health professionals, speech and language therapists and colleagues from the voluntary sector. All were learning to work together in ways they had not done before to support the social inclusion of children and young people. They were learning to do this work while relationships between their organisations were reconfigured around them as a result of the 2004 Children Act and the changes that led to it. We were not examining how practitioners were brought into existing practices, but looking at what happened when practitioners were having to work in quite new ways.

Over a four-year period, we captured the learning that occurred as their practices developed and examined the conditions that made learning possible.

In 2004 the research team produced an extensive literature review and conducted a series of regional workshops with 18 English local authorities, selected from a database of those which were moving towards new models of inter-professional work to prevent social exclusion. These workshops informed the team's conceptual models of professional learning.

In 2005 we moved to a detailed examination of multi-agency work practices via small-scale intensive studies in two local authorities. We worked with a Youth Offending Team which included professionals from social services and probation services, and police, parenting, education, health, and drugs and alcohol officers, and with a newly created Multi-Agency Project, comprising professionals from social work, health, educational psychology, Child and Adult Mental Health Services and family support.

Between 2005 and 2006 we repeated this intervention research on a larger scale in three other local authorities. This involved

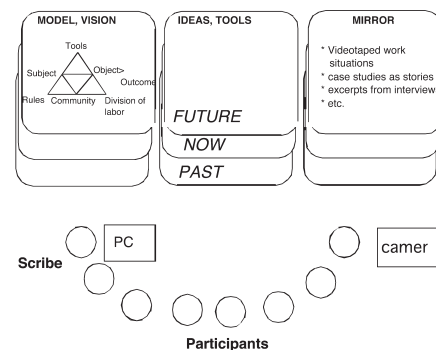
work in three multi-agency settings: an extended school; a children in public care team; and a multi-professional team that initially comprised education professionals but was subsequently expanded to include social care and health practitioners as well. An important element in this phase was the involvement of a local authority-based researcher in each site.

We used interviews with staff and young people, workplace interventions, meetings with strategy groups and, crucially, six two-hour Developmental Work Research (DWR) sessions in each site. In these sessions, professionals were confronted with contradictions in their everyday understandings of practice through analysis of the data which the researchers had gathered from them. The aim of the sessions was to address the challenges of multi-agency professional learning by encouraging the recognition of areas where there was a need for change in working practices, and by suggesting possibilities for change through re-conceptualising professional tasks and the resources that practitioners brought to bear on those tasks.

In each session, analyses of multi-agency practices were developed collaboratively between the research team and the professionals. The sessions looked at the professionals' past, present and future practices. They were encouraged to consider the development of their working practices, the structural tensions and contradictions of their present practice, and new forms of practice that might support innovations in multi-agency working. The workshops were videoed and recorded, and detailed discourse analysis of emergent concepts was undertaken to reveal the learning occurring over the six sessions. In Figure 2 we can see how these sessions were structured.

Finally, we compared baseline data, gathered in earlier regional workshops and interviews, with current understandings. We compared those who had experienced DWR interventions with others who had

Figure 2: The set-up of a DWR workshop



not, and tested the concepts developed in early interventions in local authorities where there had been no intervention. We also interviewed DWR participants six months after the sessions ended to find out how far the concepts revealed in our analyses were informing their practices. Finally, we conducted comprehensive analyses of the data and engaged in dissemination activities. Most of these activities have been aimed at checking the extent to which the ideas evident in our analysis reflected practices in other Local Authorities.

The conceptual tools we used

Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) was used to analyse the institutional implications of collective learning across multi-agency groupings. It helped us explore the interrelated changes over time in the subjects (the practitioners), the material and conceptual tools which they used, their conception of the object (what they were working on and trying to change), the division of labour (roles and power relations), the rules (procedures and protocols) and the community of all the people involved.

We developed Developmental Work Research methodology with colleagues in Engeström's Helsinki Centre. It was intended to elicit different practitioners' understandings of their work and to reveal how practitioners from different backgrounds develop and use concepts to engage with newly emerging practices. DWR is based on the Vygotskian idea of 'dual stimulation,' which is used to help practitioners reveal understandings that are embedded in their accounts of their practices and the systemic tensions and contradictions they encounter when developing new ways of working. In DWR, 'second series stimuli' are used with the participants to achieve this. In DWR sessions these stimuli are the conceptual tools of Activity Theory. The research team shared these conceptual tools with the practitioners to enable them to analyse and make sense of their everyday practices, the things that they were working on and trying to change during those practices, and the organisational features that shaped them and presented evidence of the participants' practices to them. As they used Activity Theory to work on this evidence, practitioners

- Stage One Theoretical Development
January - June 2004
Systematic Review and Clarification of Conceptual Framework
- Stage Two Analysing the National Situation
June - December 2004
Identify Local Authority Cases
- Stage Three Refine Model Through Intervention in Two Settings
January - September 2005
Development of Knowledge Tools and Preliminary Outcomes
- Stage Four Intervention Study in Three Local Authorities
October 2005 - June 2007
Testing of Feasibility of Models and Tools
- Stage Five Examining the Outcomes in a Broader Context
July - December 2007
Knowledge Sharing

Figure 1: Outline of the Project

revealed the conceptual tools they were using in their work. This methodology has enabled the research team to see what practitioners were learning in order to undertake inter-professional collaborations, and what adjustments they were making to existing practices and their own positions as professionals.

In analysing the data the research team also drew on the following concepts:

- *Expansive Learning* - in which individual and organisational learning are seen as intertwined as fundamental change takes place.
- *Relational Agency* - the capacity to work with others to expand interpretations of the problem one is working on, and to align responses to these interpretations.
- *Co-configuration* - a way of thinking about how practitioners work with each other and with clients to co-configure children's trajectories away from the risk of social exclusion. Its origins lie in Victor and Boynton's 1998 analysis of how work practices change. Co-configuration was compared with the mass customisation of services, characterised by targeting and delivering services for demographically defined groups.

We also augmented CHAT by drawing on Bernstein's work on identity and organisational structures (Bernstein, 2000). These frameworks allowed us to focus, for instance, on why and where practitioners created boundaries that shaped the inter-professional work they undertook.

What we found

While relationships between their organisations were re-configured around them, practitioners remained focused on what they saw as the needs of children and adjusted their ways of working. In many ways their practices raced ahead of both local and national strategies, as the practitioners worked creatively for children to shift systems. Our research suggests that in some instances professional practices have moved to co-configuration with an attempt to adapt practices to respond to the changing needs of clients, and to involve clients in co-designing the services they receive. We also identified the learning challenges of this new way of working. Management structures, for example, could inhibit the development of collaborative working, not least because supporting expertise distributed among different professionals made line management hard to maintain. The professional identity of practitioners working in this way became destabilised, which subverted established patterns of authority and accountability. Working with professionals we discovered and developed what the terminology of Activity Theory might term new tools and rules for co-configuration working. These included a professional approach to rule-bending and risk-taking to enable joined-up service provision which worked around systems

Major implications

We found that collaboration between professions brought benefits to professionals. It could be seen as an enhanced form of practice requiring responsive decision making and informed negotiations with others. It demanded the articulation of professional expertise, not the development of the all-purpose multi-agency worker who is seen as a generalist.

Inter-professional collaboration could improve services. Additional resources became available from accessing locally distributed professional expertise for action on complex problems. Practitioners also argued that by intervening in the early stages of accumulated vulnerability to social exclusion, collaborative preventative work should over time reduce demands on services. Recognising distributed expertise lets practitioners move from sequential referrals ("passing on bits of the child", as one practitioner termed it) towards parallel support for children and families that are likely to hasten social inclusion.

Learning in and for inter-agency work requires more attention to developing positive organisational climates for professional decision-making rather than rigid forms of inter-professional coordination. Practitioners developing co-configured

which were not changing as fast as the child-focused inter-professional practices which were being developed.

The detailed analysis of talk in the DWR sessions (Middleton *et al*, in press) revealed that:

- It is necessary to focus on the whole child in the wider context. Vulnerability only becomes apparent when one looks across many aspects of a child's life to build up a picture of accumulated risk. This focus was also essential for orchestrating responses to diagnoses of risk.
- Professionals demonstrated a growing awareness of the need to be responsive to others, both professionals and clients, in working with the strengths of their clients to build resilience.
- Professionals need to be prepared to clarify the purpose of their work and be open to alternatives which make the tacit assumptions of different professions apparent. These assumptions can be used as resources for working in responsive ways and discovering alternative ways of working.
- It is important to know who can help. Existing networks were not sufficient for the work that co-configured multi-agency working required.
- Practitioners described the need for taking risks involving rule-bending as the contradictions between emergent practices and existing rules, protocols and lines of responsibility became clear. They had to question the legitimacy of existing rules when their professional actions were directed to increasingly complex objects of activity, and to articulate how the old ways were barriers to action.

practices were learning about other professionals and themselves as well as children. We called this horizontal learning. But we found less evidence of knowledge building and sharing across hierarchical boundaries within Local Authority structures. The rich examples of inter-professional horizontal learning contrast with the difficulties that practitioners reported in moving knowledge generated in this way 'up-stream' or vertically in Local Authorities.

There were, however, some personal challenges that should not be ignored when professionals are required to dis-embed themselves from the security of established practices, and from the support of like-minded colleagues who share their professional values. We should not underestimate the emotional aspects of the shifts in identity required by the changes we witnessed. However, once practitioners from different professions discovered how much they shared a common set of values about children, families and their well-being, they became more confident in their ability to confront differences with colleagues from other professions, and to work on prevention together. We suggest that time spent discussing professional values is time well spent.

- Practitioners had to create and develop better material and conceptual tools. Not only were existing rules found wanting, but so were tools such as assessment protocols and referral systems. Practitioners developed new tools such as electronic assessment and communication devices.
- Practitioners had to develop processes for sharing knowledge and new pathways for practice. Existing knowledge-sharing systems were often insufficient. They saw the importance of an outward-looking stance and an awareness of what it takes to be 'in the know' in the complex, changing landscape of multi-agency working.
- Practitioners needed to understand themselves and their own professional values. They developed fluency about the implications of a multi-agency environment for professional values, and about the particularities of their own expertise to question and negotiate practice. Their ability to question and enhance their own practice in relation to other professionals grew.
- Practitioners developed a more consciously pedagogic stance in their work to respond to contradictions between practitioner priorities and client demands, to communicate across the boundaries between professions, and to communicate the implications of emergent practices with strategists.

These concepts were tested in post-intervention workshops with other practitioners, and in the interviews with participants in DWR sessions six months after the interventions. Both groups provided strong evidence of their broader and continuing relevance.

Further information

Bernstein, B. (2000) *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity: theory, research, critique* (revised edition). Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc.

Engeström, Y. (2004) New forms of Learning in Co-configuration Work *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 16, 11-21.

Victor, B. and Boynton, A. (1998) *Invented Here: Maximising your Organization's Internal Growth and Profitability* Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Daniels, H., Leadbetter, J. and Warmington P. with Edwards, A., Brown, S., Middleton, D., Popova, A., and Apostolov, A. (2007) Learning in and for Multiagency Working *Oxford Review of Education*, 33, 4, 521-538.

Edwards, A. (2005) Relational Agency: Learning to be a Resourceful Practitioner, *International Journal of Educational Research*, 43, 3, 168-182.

Edwards, A., Daniels, H., Gallagher, T., Leadbetter, J. and Warmington, P. (2008, in press) *Improving Interprofessional Collaborations in Children's Services*. London: Routledge.

Leadbetter, J. (2006) New Ways of Working and New Ways of Being: multiagency working and professional identity *Educational & Child Psychology*, 23, 4, 47-59.

Middleton, D., Brown, S., Daniels, H., Edwards, A., Leadbetter, J. and Warmington, P. (2008, in press) Making the Difference in Interagency Working: analytic challenges in studying professional learning in communicating what matters, in Candlin, C., and Sarangi, S. (eds.) *Handbook of Applied Linguistics Communication in Professions and Organisations*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Warmington, P. with Daniels, H., Edwards, A., Leadbetter, J., Martin, D., Brown, S. and Middleton, D. (2005) *Interagency Collaboration: a Review of the Literature* Bath: Learning in and for Interagency Working.

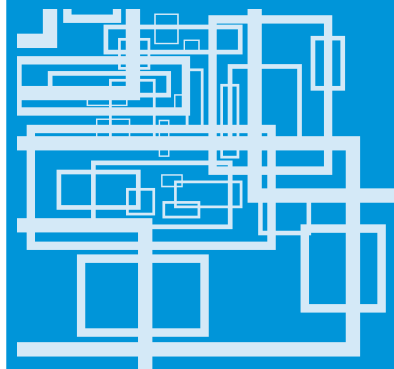
www.education.bham.ac.uk/research/projects1/liw/publications

The warrant

The study has these warrants: theoretical and methodological; empirical; and practical.

The study was located within a CHAT framework of individual and organisational learning, and was developed in parallel with Engeström's study (Engeström, 2004) of inter-professional learning in Helsinki. It was designed in stages (see Figure 1) to refine the conceptual and methodological tools used in subsequent phases. Vygotsky's long-established method of dual stimulation was used to reveal practitioners' understandings of their newly developing practices in DWR sessions. Their talk about these practices was subject to a detailed discourse analysis developed in this study (Middleton et al, in press) which revealed the concepts in use over time and across settings. These concepts were then tested with practitioners in other organisations and examined in interviews about current practices with DWR participants. In stage 4 of the study, the main intervention phase, local practitioner researchers became members of the team in each case study site. They helped navigate local systems, participated in DWR sessions and advised in analysis. They, and the steering group, which included local and national government policy strategists, were an invaluable resource. Findings have also been presented *inter alia* to CWDC, DCSF, HMI, UCET, TDA and a large number of Local Authorities, indicating the immediate relevance of the findings for current policy.

Teaching and Learning Research Programme



TLRP involves some 90 research teams with contributions from England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Work began in 2000 and the Technology Enhanced Learning phase will continue to 2012.

Learning: TLRP's overarching aim is to improve outcomes for learners of all ages in teaching and learning contexts across the UK.

Outcomes: TLRP studies a broad range of learning outcomes, including the acquisition of skill, understanding, knowledge and qualifications and the development of attitudes, values and identities relevant to a learning society.

Lifecourse: TLRP supports projects and related activities at many ages and stages in education, training and lifelong learning.

Enrichment: TLRP commits to user engagement at all stages of research. It promotes research across disciplines, methodologies and sectors, and supports national and international co-operation.

Expertise: TLRP works to enhance capacity for all forms of research on teaching and learning, and for research informed policy and practice.

Improvement: TLRP develops the knowledge base on teaching and learning and policy and practice in the UK.

TLRP Directors' Team
Professor Andrew Pollard | London
Professor Richard Noss | London
Professor Miriam David | London
Professor Alan Brown | Warwick
Professor Mary James | London

TLRP Programme Office
Sarah Douglas | sarah.douglas@ioe.ac.uk
James O'Toole | j.o'toole@ioe.ac.uk
tlrp@ioe.ac.uk

TLRP
Institute of Education
University of London
20 Bedford Way
London WC1H 0AL
UK

Tel +44 (0)20 7911 5577



Project website:

<http://www.bath.ac.uk/research/liw/>

Project contacts:

Professor Harry Daniels

Centre for Sociocultural and Activity Theory Research
Department of Education, University of Bath, Bath BE2 7AY
Tel: 00 44 1225 38 5690; h.r.j.daniels@bath.ac.uk

Professor Anne Edwards

OSAT, Department of Education, University of Oxford, Oxford, OX2 6PY
Tel: +44 (0) 1865 611001; anne.edwards@education.ox.ac.uk

Project team:

Harry Daniels, Anne Edwards, Apostol Apostolov, Steve Brown, Ioanna Kinti, Jane Leadbetter, Deirdre Martin, Mariann Märtsin, David Middleton, Sarah Parsons, Anna Popova, Penny Smith, Paul Warmington, Kate Youngs

Local Authority Researchers: Irene Dooher, Simon Jenner, Alison Knights

ISBN-978-0-85473-823-6



9 780854 738236

May 2008