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Ways of seeing – ways of learning: the role of honest methodology in research and evaluation

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Ways of seeing – ways of learning: the role of honest methodology in research and evaluation

Abstract

This work is based on eight papers published between 1998 and 2006. The papers present a process of investigating, discussing and documenting how, through exploring, stretching and developing opportunities offered by various qualitative research approaches, facilitated collaborative action research (CAR) and evaluation became entwined. They question how and where participants in projects recognise their own knowledge and learning, and how they use and develop their understandings in relation to new knowledge. In these papers I worked at the interface between the known and the nearly known; between knowledge-in-use and tacit knowledge that was yet to be useful. This interface, a 'messy area', was a place of contested knowledge. In this 'messy area' long-held views, shaped by professional knowledge, practical judgement, experience and intuition, came together to disturb both individual and communally held notions of knowledge for practice. Working in the 'messy area' enabled new knowing that has both theoretical and practical significance to arise, a 'messy turn' to take place. This is the purpose of mess.

These papers add to the body of knowledge about 'seeing' and 'knowing', 'the importance of not knowing' and the role of participation, collaboration, facilitation and learning as key change mechanisms in research and evaluation.

Introduction

I began my action research career in 1991. At that time it was quite a solitary affair, investigating my own practice but it soon broadened out through engagement with staff and families I worked with in my role as head of a pre-school service for children with special educational needs. When I came to work at Northumbria

University I became involved in evaluation. Initial evaluations were carried out, mainly due to funder expectation and direction, using the more traditional evaluation method of external evaluator as interrogator. Along with my colleagues at the University, I recognised serious constraints of the 'evaluator as outsider' approach and had concerns about engaging in evaluations that reported what was happening, met the needs of funders, but had little effect on practice. These concerns were interwoven with doubts about methods per se. Through the adoption of pre-determined approaches to collecting data and reporting findings, there were times when we appeared to lose the opportunity to reach the underlying issues, concerns and elements in practice that may have truly held the potential for development of that practice. This led me to question what might enable me to reveal underlying processes for practice development; was there a research method that offered such a way in? Even in action research, which to me at the time seemed the most practical of research methods, I did not think I was always reaching into the heart of projects, nor was I able to articulate what might make it both more practical and educational. My work then became to reveal more about, what I saw at that time as, a gap in understanding and articulation.

Two aspects of research were of particular interest to me in this work, the first being the notion of a 'messy area' in research. This is the phase where researchers find they have lots of ideas but don't know which ones might be the important ones, how they are going to pull them together and where they are going to take them. My experience was that this phase, much talked about by researchers, was lost in written accounts and absent from final reports. The feelings of floundering, and the subsequent descriptions of 'mess' when trying to find a way through the research process, became central to my deliberations. My 'hypothesis' was that in this 'messy area' learning takes place. People feel as though they are floundering because they have to let go of some of their beliefs and understanding to make new meanings from what they see. Conditions for learning were located where multiple perspectives came together, where participants in research floundered and then found their way again and where tensions were held and dissipated; the 'messy area'. Entering the 'messy area' can be

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professionally and personally uncomfortable (see Papers 6 and 7) but a necessary process if changes in thinking and practice are to occur.

My second area of focus was on the role of participants in research and evaluation in respect of seeing the yet to be seen (Papers 6-8) and the trustworthiness of the research/evaluation process (Paper 8). I recognised that participants could play a vital role in unpicking some of the complex understandings that formulate practice but this was unlikely to happen unless they were embedded in the research/evaluation process. The embeddedness of practitioners in research is the subject of many learned discussions in respect of rigour (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, Winter, 1989, Seale and Silverman, 1997, Bradbury and Reason, 2001). At the core of this argument is the notion of validity and rigour in research, characterised in terms of lack of bias, keeping a respectable distance from passions in practitioner understandings and keeping to the determinants of a given method. My work, presented in these papers, contributes to that debate. It takes a distinctive approach that identifies the 'messy area' in research as a key process in supporting the 'trustworthiness and worthwhileness' (paper 8) of research and evaluation.

I was also searching for ways of keeping change active rather than leaving it as a fixed piece of practice. To fix would be to preserve and hence halt knowledge and practice development rather than take it forward (Papers 2, 6, 7 & 8). I was searching for a way to embed knowledge in contingency and conditionality whist giving it sufficient value for practitioners to be confident change makers. A way of enhancing what Lather (1994) termed 'catalytic validity' i.e. the degree in which the research process energises participants towards a closer knowing of reality in order to transform it.

> **Text Box 1**
>
> **Importance of transience**
>
> *On a beach in Cornwall...I made a spiral of seaweed below the tide line. I liked the idea that my work, lasting only a tide, was interposed between past and future patterns of seaweed of infinite variations, made by natural and luna forces, repeating for millions of years. Often the transient is closely related to the eternal in nature.*
>
> Long:1998 (no page numbers)

Most papers in this collection conclude by stating both something that has been understood and identifying issues that are nearly known but yet to be understood. This is a deliberate attempt to invite the reader to embark on engagement and critique: to stimulate thinking that goes beyond the text so that a reader can take the ideas presented and continue the journey: 'writerly' rather than 'readerly' text. The idea of a 'writerly' text, proposed by Barthes (1974) and developed by Sumara and Luce-Kapler (1993) in relation to action research, is that it leaves the reader with room in which to 'write-in' his or her own thoughts and/or experiences.

> "Unlike the readerly text, the writerly text…does not attempt to control the reader; he or she must make his or her own connections between images, events and setting that are presented by the author."
>
> (Sumara and Luce-Kapler, 1993:390)

In this appraisal paper I have made use of text boxes to insert excerpts from the writings of certain artists who have helped stimulate my own thinking whilst engaged in this project of finding ways of seeing. I include them here to provide fresh perspectives and external vantage points to the viewing of the familiar. In the spirit of my full submission, I invite the reader to use a 'new or alien lens' (Sanger, 1994), and adopt a 'writerly' (Barthes, 1974) approach to the reading of this paper and associated publications.

Underpinnings

The work submitted for the PhD by publication draws from, and builds upon, a number of key academic practitioners who have worked in, and written about, action research and evaluation over the last 30 years. Beginning with the work of Stenhouse and the Humanities Curriculum Project (1975, 1980), Elliott's interpretation of it as a practical research tool was both an inspiration and a catalyst to my own work. For Elliott, however, action research, grounded firmly in the personal, was part of self-evaluation with theoretical abstraction playing "a subordinate role in the development of a practical wisdom" (Elliott, 1991:53). Whilst being very much engaged with the practical element of Elliott's work, my own work (Paper 8) suggested that theories in respect of the links between action research and development and change were

increasingly evident and important in identifying how we might reach practical outcomes. This thinking is embedded in the work of Weiss (1995) who, when exploring theory-based evaluation, she claimed that there is 'Nothing as Practical as a Good Theory'.

I was also drawn by the work of Winter (2000) and Somekh (2002) in respect to the development of knowledge through action research approaches. Winter (2000:1) suggested that action research could provide an account of a specific situation that gets '... sufficiently close to its underlying structure to enable others to see potential similarities with other situations'. Somekh (2002) articulated how the process of action research takes account of the need to integrate the construction of knowledge with its enactment in practice.

By the end of the 1990s I had moved from using action research for individual development and change to using it as an approach for developmental evaluation within organisations. Given my interest in the link between research, action and the evaluation of action, I was drawn towards a realistic paradigm rooted in, but developed from, the work of writers such as MacDonald (1977), Stake (1984), House (1990), Pawson and Tilley (1997), Kazi, (2003), Weiss (1995) and Chelimsky and Shadish (1997) who encapsulated the role of development in evaluation. Their work appeared to liberate evaluation from the overbearing weight of audit and performance management.

Setting the scene

Paper 1: The Importance of Mess in Action Research

Paper 1 sets the scene for my project of articulating ways of seeing and learning in research. As a novice action researcher I had become particularly interested in two aspects of the research process, first the role of methodology and method in shaping outcomes, and second the portrayal of such outcomes. Drawing on my own experience of the action research process and discussions held with other relatively

novice action researchers who were collaborating in the Management of Human Development (MOHD) project (described in Paper 1:94), I made explicit a sense of unease in relation to research processes. On one hand there was a strongly held belief amongst the MOHD researchers that we were using an action research process to address issues, to learn and to develop knowledge in a manner that was appropriate to the task; on the other hand, we did not see ourselves as following any given model of research processes found in the literature. We could not say we were following a path of enquiry or a spiral of action research (Carr and Kemmis, 1986) as we kept branching off, or 'treeing' (as described in Paper 1:100) into other areas of discourse and discovery. We kept adapting our research, either by shifting our spiral to another plane, or by adding new loops and pathways. We felt that this process of adding to, shifting and branching off, thinking and sifting, held importance for our research process. It helped us recognise inter-connectedness and complexities involved in our enquiries, yet this often left us unable to isolate clear lines of progression. We felt there was a *gap between our practice and published models of research* (transcript from MOHD discussions). We began to feel unsure of ourselves as researchers and practitioners, not knowing where to go next in our enquiry being deep in a messy area, and wondering whether we were doing *'proper research'*. Perceptions of self as researcher were linked to portrayals in the literature of neat and tidy research models. In such models the 'messy areas' remained hidden from public scrutiny, not being described as part of the spiral of the research process nor identified in written reports. Not following a path that others had apparently successfully negotiated led to feelings of being deviant.

> *It's not really action research or anything like that because action*
> *research to me is something where you have got a fairly clear plan,*
> *you do some observation and you act and you monitor it and there is*
> *a fairly clear cycle.*
>
> (Paper 1:97. Participant in MOHD project.)

Hiding the fact that the research had gone through a time when researchers felt lost in the process was described by one member of the MOHD group as dishonest, but perhaps the appropriate thing to do if we wanted our research outcomes to be accepted. Practice that fits neatly into given research frameworks has historically

been associated with rigour and credibility in the eyes of the research community. Deutscher et al (1993) writing about quantitative research and its emphasis on reliability and replicability, suggest that:

> "It would seem far more worthwhile to make a shrewd guess regarding that which is essential than to accurately measure that which is likely to prove irrelevant..." p19

They go on to suggest that, as a consequence of over-reliance on method as rigour:

> "... we may have been learning a great deal about how to pursue an incorrect course with a maximum of precision"
> (Deutscher et al, 1993:25)

Acknowledgements that rigour in research may be found in areas other than methodological adherence were helpful. I had already begun to recognise that, for me, choosing a method for enquiry could not be merely a technical exercise, it involved getting a feel for the environment for that research and the possible needs of the project in hand.

In the literature there is evidence of concern that describing a research process, defining pathways, sets imperatives, narrows opportunities and fixes ideas (Elliott, 1991, McNiff, 1992, Hopkins, 1993, Carr, 1995). Aligning ourselves with known researchers who argued that the validity of an investigative process is not necessarily based on proving that researchers have rigorously followed a method, was liberating for this group of researchers in the MOHD project. Methods for research and evaluation were not there to tell us what to look for, but to offer ways of seeing. They should provide a steer for a process but should not draw a line on a map to be slavishly followed. Qualitative study is a systematic process conducted with demanding, though not necessarily standardised, procedures. Departure from method should, therefore, be a valuable and capturable part of the process.

In Paper 1 I argue that, in tidying away the part of the research that was hard to articulate (the 'messy area'), research reports were not only giving novice researchers

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a false sense of what participation in research might look and feel like, but also were not reporting a valuable part of the process itself. Paper 1 was a response to a need for public acknowledgement of the value of the more messy parts of research. It identified 'the messy area' as an arena for creativity where joint application of knowledge, expertise and intuition could be exercised. It was a melting pot for the 'known', the 'nearly known' and the 'to be known' and the space where learning takes place. These 'messy areas' contain 'swampy lowlands' (Schön, 1983), areas where confusing 'messes', incapable of resolution through the imposition of predetermined technical method reside, and zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), zones where the difference between a person's actual development level as determined by independent problem solving, and the level of potential development as determined by supported, collaborative problem solving, are active. The 'messy areas' have, therefore, an important part to play in the practice of research and evaluation as they appear to facilitate knowing, meaning making and learning. I concluded Paper 1 by throwing down a challenge in respect of getting the 'mess' out into the open and allowing it to be scrutinised for its intrinsic worth. In subsequent papers I took up this challenge.

Starting Points for thinking

- what is the role of the 'messy area'?
- there is a need for improved depiction of research practice that includes the less tangible aspects of research
- what would an 'honest' depiction of qualitative methods look like?
- neat/systematic method should not necessarily be equated with validity
- what is the role of collaboration in the 'messy area'?
- what elements of research and evaluation approaches are important in effecting change or how do evaluations effect change in practice?

Developing the approach

Paper 2: Local Evaluation of a National Early Years Excellence Centres Pilot Programme: integrating performance management and participatory evaluation.

Paper 3: Evaluating the Early Excellence initiative: the relationship between evaluation, performance management and practitioner participation.

Paper 4: Voices from Segregated Schooling: Towards an Inclusive Education System.

Paper 5: Parents' Perspectives on the Closure of a Special School: Towards Inclusion in Partnership.

Papers (2-5) clarified and developed issues articulated in Paper 1 through the experience of carrying out research and evaluation projects under two Labour Policy initiatives, the Early Excellence Centres (EECs) and the inclusion agenda set out in 'Excellence for All Children' (DfEE: 1997).

Papers 2 and 3 enquired into methods used for evaluating local EECs as part of the national evaluation of the EEC pilot project. As local evaluators, my colleagues and I were predisposed to evaluation for knowledge building and development through a process Greene (1997) termed 'participatory citizenship'. Given the emphasis of the EEC Programme on providing integrated services for local communities to act as catalysts for further development of early years services over a wider area, our principles for evaluation seemed appropriate to this work. As the national evaluation progressed however, the nature of the requirement for local evaluation moved from contextually based indicators of quality towards requests for 'monitoring data' with externally imposed indicators being offered as a framework for identifying success. Paper 2 takes up the tensions this raised, contributing to the debate about the inter-relationship between externally imposed frameworks and local contextualisation of method, performance management and evaluation. It asks where, if performance management becomes the dominant approach, might the opportunities for development and change be found? Pre-ordained frameworks for data collection and analysis and fixed templates for reporting appeared to remove spaces for learning. They created a straightjacket for enquiry which assigned value only to expected and predicted outcomes.

Paper 3 continued the argument that opportunities for learning about programme development across the EEC programme had been substantially reduced by the imposition of external indicators and frameworks for reporting. It identified that, alongside general principles for development, there was a need for localised indicators drawn from local knowledge and understandings. The case study contained in Paper 3 (pp 342-343) described a participatory approach which drew on dialogical methods where conversations, fostered amongst participants, were used to capture the changing, complex inter-subjectivity of understandings in relation to programme development (Greene, 1997). Decisions about what made data important (data analysis), although formally with the evaluators, were very much in the hands of participants. As participants had been able to see and hear for themselves, the thinking and learning was held and progressed by them and it was their knowledge, their understandings and their vision that led to new ways of working. Participation, the engagement of those who are part of the process, is a strong element in learning about programme quality, both from a personal and organisational perspective. Who can know better about their work than those involved? Who better can *integrate the construction of knowledge with its enactment in practice?'* (Somekh, 2002:90). A principle for enquiry that embedded the need for authentic participation (McTaggert, 1997) for

> **Text Box 2**
>
> **Working contextually**
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> *When I touch a rock, I am touching and working the space around it. It is not independent of its surroundings and the way it sits tells how it came to be there. In an effort to understand why that rock is there and where it is going, I must work with it in the area in which I found it.*
>
> Goldsworthy:1990 (no page numbers)

programme learning and development held out promise as one that could be transferred to similar programmes, even if there were different underlying circumstances. The problem of transference, identified, amongst others, by Fullen (1999) and Ying Ho, (1999), is well recognised in the literature. The experience of participatory case study appeared to offer a process that not only enabled new learning and knowledge building, but held the possibility of transferring that knowledge into practice.

Papers 4 and 5 drew on knowledge from a project that investigated notions of inclusion in the light of the re-organisation of specialist provision for children with special educational needs in one northern city. Paper 4 looked at inclusion from the perspective of pupils, considering the issue of voice and how to get beyond researcher driven frameworks for giving value to data. The basis of the method chosen for data collection and analysis was the act of choosing in relation to the taking of photographs about the research topic. (Paper 4: 300). The children were asked to think about what they liked about being at their current school, what made it important to them and why. They were each asked to decide on twelve things they would like to photograph for a photograph album that would be a memory of their school. As they could only take a limited amount of photographs they had to make choices. Discussions about which photographs should be included, and why they were the important ones, took place with the other pupils in the group. These discussions formed the main arena for data collection. The active engagement in, and collection of, discussions offered a way of working with the children that delved further into their thoughts and feelings and provided a way of working towards a collaborative synthesis of their multiple perspectives. It was a way of hearing voice, and offering representations of participants' views that were less cluttered by researcher/evaluator preoccupations.

Paper 5 also had a focus on voice, putting the perspectives of parents at the centre of meaning-making and understanding. Interviews followed up by focus groups were used as the main methods for data collection. Contemplating this in the light of my concerns in respect of participation and development, two key issues were evident. First, although perspectives of parents had been gathered, they had not been subjected to further reflection or critique as in the case of the project with the children. In addition to this, the synthesis of key issues remained in the hands of the researchers who then employed their own filters for data selection. Second, despite revealing knowledge in relation to understandings of inclusion the evaluation had not led to a change in principles for practice, or practice itself. The project had, in effect, become an in-depth audit of current views and understandings rather than being developmentally active. A key question was, therefore, what prevented change? Why had the commissioners not used the

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information they had received in our report to develop services differently? What appeared to be missing was an opportunity for collaborative thinking and learning by those who were in a position to make change.

Facilitated Collaborative Action Research as an approach to evaluation: in practice

Paper 6: Reflecting and learning together: action research as a vital element of developing understanding and practice.
Paper 7: Starting where we can: using action research to develop inclusive practice.

Opportunities to practice evaluation where the 'messy area' was central to the process, came from two commissions, one to evaluate the implementation of inclusive policy in practice across early years settings in Newcastle upon Tyne Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership (EYDCP) and the second an evaluation of the early years sector of an Education Action Zone (EAZ). The nature of the work with the EYDCP was to make an account of, and account for, inclusive practice using three dimensions: understanding notions of inclusion, making it work in practice and knowing what enabled it to take place. The evaluation was to investigate contexts for development rather than the intrinsic worth of the programme itself. The evaluation in the EAZ was somewhat more complex in that both the intrinsic worth of programmes that had been instigated and contexts for development were to be evaluated. For both these evaluations I chose a facilitated collaborative action research (CAR) approach. My use of facilitated CAR drew upon and developed a theory of group dynamics, described by Oja and Smulyan (1989), to engage participants in thinking, reflecting, learning and delivering change. I particularly wanted to explore the role of collaborative research as a learning approach and how it might act as a bridge between theoretical understandings, learning and practical change.

The role of the participants in these evaluations was much broader than one of answering questions shaped by researcher interests and knowledge. Participants were researchers too. They were engaged in thinking about and developing their own

research project, setting indicators for recognising quality and development and collaboratively critiquing principles for practice. They collected data, had active involvement in its analysis and instigated change. They were researchers, teachers, thinkers, learners, innovators and evaluators. McTaggart's (1997) notion of authentic participation was now firmly embedded in the evaluation process, but this was hard work.

> "It was hard, especially at the beginning because you [the project co-coordinator] didn't really tell us what to do, but then I realised that you couldn't anyway and we had to do the thinking"
>
> (Paper 7: Fieldnotes. Research Participant)

The facilitators' role was to walk a fine line between giving enough information to enable participants to develop guiding principles for their thinking and action whilst leaving sufficient space for reflection and critique to avoid fixing principles in given sets of practice. Practitioners needed to remain comfortable in their core knowledge whilst critiquing current frameworks for practice, developing new horizons and articulating learning. The sharing of current practice and identification of indicators that would identify progress in terms of practice, was central to this. Accepting differences in circumstance and opportunity, whilst agreeing certain principles for development (Papers 6&7) allowed diverse settings to see ways of moving forward that were not discredited because they did not fit a given set of standards (Papers 7&8). Critiquing indicators at a local level was one

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Box 3

Not fixing

A fixed position implies we are standing still, that even the eye is still. Yet we all know our eyes move constantly, and the only time they stop moving is when we're dead – or when we are staring. And if we're staring we're not really looking.

Hockney 2004: 102

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of the vital processes for engendering an active synthesis of understandings leading to programme change To measure against a fixed requirement has long been considered proof of value, but I had already experienced how measuring against fixed external requirements had the effect of hiding programme value and stifling programme development (Papers 2 and 3). The purpose of the critique of indicators was not to ignore or abandon external policy drivers and indicators of quality, but to find a way of establishing local indicators that worked within the requirements of national

programmes. I wanted to capture local diversity and innovation to investigate what enabled programme development.

In both projects (EAZ and EYDCP) there was considerable evidence of practical change at practitioner level. Where practitioners had close working relationships with managers more significant, organisational change occurred (Pinkney and Zajack (undated)). Practitioners could make changes within their own setting but very few had the capacity to make changes at managerial or policy level. As in the project described in Papers 3 and 4, despite the fact that key issues were reported back to the appropriate offices, organisational change based on the recommendations of the project reports were not readily forthcoming. Managers had not participated in the *'toil, distress, trouble: exertions of the body or mind... co-labouring'* (Sumara and Luce-Kapler, 1993:393) alongside other participants. The distancing of managers from the evaluation process, and all the hard work and learning that took place within that process, was seen by the project participants as a major barrier to effecting change.

Critiquing methodology

Paper 8: Collaborative action research for development and evaluation: a good fit or the road to myopia?

I had now developed an approach to evaluation that:-

- used CAR approach that captured practitioner thinking and learning, as a key driver for change;
- used participants as co-researchers to both identify indicators of success and articulate whether they had been achieved; and
- had a predisposition to maintaining fluidity rather than fixing practice and measures of quality for that practice.

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Paper 8 explored whether, by situating evaluation so firmly in participatory engagement, there was a danger of losing critical perspective. It set facilitated CAR as an evaluation approach within the contemporary debate on validity and rigour (Scriven, 1997, Bradbury and Reason, 2001, Spencer, et al, 2003, Rolfe, 2006) Traditionally, externally imposed measures of quality have been held up as objective and reliable indicators and measures of programme quality. Despite continued debate, outcomes that search for stable, measurable and objective truths continue to be seen as the 'gold standard'. This paper argues that 'worthwhileness', i.e. what gives programmes meaning and purpose, is too complex to be fitted and presented only through externally derived measurement processes. It built upon Blumer's warning that remaining aloof as a so-called 'objective' observer, refusing to take the role of the acting unit is:

> "...to risk the worst kind of subjectivism – the objective observer is
> likely to fill in the process of interpretation with his own surmises in
> place of catching the process as it occurs in the experience of the
> acting unit which uses it"

(Blumer, 1969:86)

Paper 8 argued that the 'value' of an evaluation lies in capturing the very essence of what is under scrutiny, the lynch pins of programme effectiveness and drivers for change. A search for a simple truth, capturing externally devised 'objective' measures, is less likely to offer information about programme quality, and less likely to be a sound basis for programme development, than one that disturbs notions of programme quality and captures the essence of programme complexity. In this paper the use of facilitated CAR was revisited as a dialectic using it to haul apart rhetoric and well-rehearsed notions of practice. This paper delved into how facilitated CAR can puncture and critique a general picture enjoyed by practitioners that can mask underlying issues. Pivotal to the process was collaborative learning through the gathering of multiple perspectives and meanings and working together to identify and articulate understandings. Here was the constant exploration, pushing at boundaries, that made for seeing new possibilities and dynamic and changing practice. The ongoing co-construction of meaning, knowing and doing through new was of seeing was at the heart of the change process.

Throughout my work the notion of 'seeing' has been explored and championed as a pre-requisite for learning and action. I have drawn on the work of artists and photographers for inspiration. In Paper 8 I drew again on the work of philosopher and photographer Roland Barthes (1982) to help understand the effect of illuminative ways of seeing. His notion of 'a punctum', a place where one set of seeing/thinking is consolidated but leads directly to other thoughts and ideas, is helpful when considering how projects can avoid fixing practice based on the currently known. Fundamental to this was how research approaches might enable people to see beyond the 'studium', that comfortable, general understanding of their work, to reach the 'punctum', the wider issues that relate to their context.

Concluding but not finishing

Concerned that research and evaluation practice could function merely as static reporting procedures rather than dynamic actors in the processes of learning and change I have been investigating the links between learning and knowledge construction in research and evaluation and how the knowledge construction process might effect enactment in practice i.e. what facilitates change. Whilst the starting point for this work was Elliott's construction of action research in the personal, I have taken this beyond self to investigate a collaborative endeavour; to find out how a co-construction of a vision of practice might punctuate beliefs support learning, new understandings and change in practice. The 'messy area', identified as an exchange mechanism for perceptions and beliefs, knowledge and learning and as catalyst for effective development and change, is revealed as a key element of this construction.

This story of my investigation cannot be neatly told; writing is a linear process but the story is not linear. The story flickers backwards and forwards through time. Each new project moved between light and shade, greys and colour, as original meanings and understandings were revisited, re-understood, developed and embedded. Each thread of thinking, researching and developing, whilst taking its own course, became inter-twined with others in a complex weave resulting in a set of principles for practice as outlined below. These are principles rather than guidelines for practice, as practice is

ever changing and the guidelines for each practical event need to be contextually developed.

Some principles for practice

- the 'messy' part of research is important as it provides a space for participatory learning in research and evaluation
- facilitating new ways of seeing, meaning making and learning is a vital part of a change process
- authentic participation and collaborative endeavour are key drivers for programme development and change
- methodologies should articulate the 'messy area', the learning arena, as part of the research and evaluation process in a way that encourages and legitimises exploration rather than constraining or prescribing it
- methods should be the servant of the research/evaluation process, not vice versa

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In writing this overview I realise, retrospectively, that I have been carrying out one long action research project. It is important that I clarify that this as 'retrospective labelling' as the participants in the MOHD project (Paper 1) identified 'retrospective labelling' as one of their *'guilty secrets'*. I discover that I have been moving along a modified action research spiral, similar to the one depicted by Carr

> **Box 4**
>
> **Waiting for knowing**
>
> *I have become aware of how nature is in a state of change and how that change is the key to understanding. I want my art to be sensitive and alert to changes in material, season and weather...I am sometimes left stranded by a change in the weather with half-understood feelings that have to travel with me until conditions are right for them to reappear.*
>
> Goldsworthy: 1990 (No page numbers).

and Kemmis (1986) but that I have been doing a lot of *'treeing'* and *'messing'* (Paper 1:100) on the way. Action research is not just a 'search', it is 're'-search, which suggests that we 're'turn to the subject matter and search again. The methods and principles of reflective re-visiting, as outlined by Carr and Kemmis (1986), have informed my research and evaluation practice. They have played the part of those roots and rocks suggested by Goldsworthy (1990) in that they have been the stability from which I have seen, investigated and understood new vistas. In travelling a more convoluted path I have passed by the same places a number of times but in a slightly

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different space and with new experiences to sharpen and focus my seeing. In following a line you may travel along it and you may stop, but you only get the chance to look back, not to see from a myriad of interesting angles. A modified, more convoluted spiral allowed more space for contemplation than a line (or even a spiral) might have offered and embraced the 'messy area' as part of the process (Papers 6 and 7). Unlike Mellor (2001) who concluded, after many struggles, that:

> "...it was more honest to abandon attempts to hide my methodological struggles under the label of action research, and simply to aim to write as openly and clearly as possible about the very perplexing path of the inquiry" p458

I argue that this area of struggle and learning, the 'messy area', should be recognised in methodological approaches so that it can be accepted and understood as part of the action research cycle. If this 'messy area' is left out of methodological descriptions it is likely to remain, hidden, misunderstood and under-utilised. The 'messy area' should be recognised as a vital and key element of action research and developmental evaluation and openly represented in reports. An honest embodiment of process and practice allows both the importance and the purpose of 'mess' to be articulated.

Towards advancement: finding a 'messy turn'.

As a novice researcher in the early 1990s I was influenced by a particular version of action research led by Stenhouse (1975) in the United Kingdom, located in educational settings and concentrated on self-development through collaborative endeavour (Paper 1). Such research, specifically located in my own practice with the intention of changing and improving that practice, is characterised by Reason and Torbert (2001:17) as first person research practice. As outlined in Paper 1:93-94, additional inspiration was drawn from the writings of researchers such as Carr and Kemmis (1986) and Elliott (1991) whose early work put notions of self-evaluation and personal change based on collaborative encounters at the forefront of the research endeavour.

As my experience of research progressed I recognised that the action research I was undertaking held opportunities beyond self development and change in personal

practice. As the papers presented in this collection demonstrate, I developed both a second-person research approach using co-operative/collaborative inquiry with the intent of achieving practice change in the domain of those who co-laboured in that inquiry, and third-person research i.e. research that speaks to a wider audience beyond the immediate inquirers. I used these action research approaches for the purposes of capturing the impact of new policy initiatives in early years practices (Papers 2,3,6 & 7) with children with special educational needs (Papers 4 & 5) and as a developmental evaluation process following in the footsteps of evaluators such as MacDonald (1977), House (1990), Chelimsky and Shadish (1997) and Greene (1997) (Papers 2, 3 & 8). This change in focus reflected my broader expectation of the possibilities of action research. I drew on the work of researchers such as Somekh (1995, 1999, 2003) Winter (1989, 1998a, 1998b), Heron (1996), Kemmis (2001) and Noffke (1994) who explored the possibilities of a much wider remit for action research, with Reason & Bradbury (2001) arguing that building democratic, participative, pluralist communities of inquiry is central to this research approach. I put active collaboration in the research process at the heart of my work as a way of supporting innovative thinking leading to changes in practice. Change in practice appeared to be stimulated by the shared learning engendered when multiple perspectives are brought together. This pedagogical element of collaborative action research is explored and developed in Paper 6. It is grounded in a theory of learning that uses a social constructivist/interactionist approach and based on Freire's belief that a pedagogy which can help oppressed people must be forged with, not for them (Freire, 1972). The ongoing co-construction of meaning in action, where multiple thoughts and ideas were shared, critiqued and developed, became a focus and driving force in my approach to research and evaluation.

The process of co-construction, whilst neatly encapsulated by this phrase, was never an easy, straightforward happening. It was messy, variable and unstable. It seemed to stand outside any neat representations of an action research approach. My concern about the true representation of the research process is taken up in a number of papers in this collection but specifically in Papers 1, 6, 7, and 8. A key dilemma throughout my work, as raised in Paper 1, has been how to represent what has happened during

the research/evaluation process in an honest way. It is not just being honest about what had been learnt but *how* that learning occurred, the nature of the learning process being a key contributor to embedding learning in practice and enabling others to learn from such an experience.

When researchers informally describe their research, be they novice or experienced researchers, they invariably recount being "in a mess" at some point (Paper 1). That mess occurs in research appears to be generally, if often tacitly, accepted. What its role might be and where it sits in the methodological descriptions remains relatively unexamined. What I was characterising as 'mess' was generally absent from published accounts of research: it is not included in methodological outlines or summative descriptions and has never been advocated as a process to be undertaken as part of the research cycle/spiral/model. Accounts of enquiry tend to involve

> "...categorisation, crystallisation, codification, making things clear, taking a line, developing constructs through which the world can be viewed. They are logical, clear, tidy, parsimonious, rational, consistent. The disordered or undisciplined is frowned upon and rejected." (Thomas 1998:142)

Given that it occurs I wanted to firstly articulate the mess and secondly identify its role and purpose in the research process.

Why articulate the mess?

The mess needs to be articulated, firstly, because it is there. It is the 'swampy lowlands' identified by Schön (1983). If its existence is not acknowledged it remains hidden and its purpose lost to open debate and discussion: it is not recognised as part of the research process (Paper 1). Most accounts of research omit reference to time in these

Box 5
Articulating the known
What is articulated strengthens itself and what is not articulated tends towards non-being
Heaney: 1999 (No page numbers)

swampy, messy areas. To omit the experience of so many researchers means that accounts of the research process are incomplete. They do not offer a true and honest picture of the research process. Such denial may indeed undermine the confidence of

researchers who find themselves 'in a mess'. Mellor (1999) talked honestly about the personal mess he found himself in when overwhelmed by data.

> "I wasn't coping properly with the incessant demands of ethnography. I wondered if a better ethnographer would have been on top of all the detail and better able to keep track of the ethnographic equivalent of boxes of wood screws." (p. 108)

Rather than seeing this as a part of the process of inquiry he saw this as his own particular problem; was he an inadequate researcher? He felt overwhelmed because he could not put things neatly in their boxes. Given his previous knowledge of research processes, he was driven by a presumed need to find a pattern in things and to put things in their place. At this point in his research he appeared to have been driven by what Law (2004) characterised as a general obsession in research with clarity, specificity and the definite. It was the neat outcome of research that was seen as important, not the detail of the research process and the learning that took place during that research. Law (2004) recognising the "systematic exclusion of mess", dedicated a whole book to how method deals with this aspect of research. He was interested in the process of knowing mess and of finding ways of living with and knowing confusion. The mess he described, however, was generally a result of the bringing together of different methods rather than an intrinsic part of method itself.

Secondly, the pull towards a neat model of research has the possibility of limiting researchers to reporting *what fits* rather than *what is*. Like Hopkins, (1993) I was concerned that tight specifications of process steps and cycles for action research might prescribe a dependable framework that could ultimately inhibit thinking and action. Carr (1997) raised this very issue when tracing the idea of method to ancient Greece where adhering to an agreed procedure was seen as an alternative to the difficulties of philosophising in seeking truth. Keeping things neat, not laying open the messy part of research may therefore limit opportunities for knowing, knowledge building and development. Methods become *the* template for practice. Using the works of authors such as McNiff (1992), Hopkins (1993) and McTaggart (1996) as a

starting point, I began to explore the notion of messy research as research that was not fixed in pre-determined procedures and embraced the complex reality of situations.

Thirdly, as mess seems to exist regardless of its lack of public face, I believed it must have a purpose. Mess appeared to occur as researchers followed a "...zig-zag path of crossing from their intuitive to analytical mode of thinking and back" (Paper 1:103). Where challenges take place to current orthodoxies, both personal and organisational, commonly held understandings and ways of practicing have to be re-examined, critiqued and in some cases relinquished. Stepping outside everyday presuppositions and working beliefs and mining the tacit underpinnings that frame perceptions of reality lead to a loss of certainty. This is where the 'messy area' is found: where participants have left behind old beliefs but as yet have not made sense of the new. The 'messy area' is the communicative space where researcher participants delve into individual knowing and collaborative understanding, where expert (practitioner) knowledge, experience, judgement, creativity and intuition are used to embrace multiple and new ways of seeing. It provides a space for imaginative freedom and new ideas; here we can celebrate 'The importance of not always knowing what you are doing' Claxton (2000). The 'messy area' is the place where 'mutually incompatible alternatives' (Feyerabend, 1975) are debated and wrestled with; where co-labouring takes place (Sumara & Luce-Kapler, 1993). It provides the space for engaging with "indeterminate zones of practice... situations of complexity and uncertainty" (Schön, 1992:51) and includes Vygotsky's (1978) 'Zones of Proximal Development'. The 'messy area' is the nurturing ground for reaching a punctum point (Papers 1 & 8). Disorder should not be seen as a flaw as it is part of the creative impulse necessary for imaginative change and development; it is where erudition takes place; this is the 'messy turn'.

The place of mess

Law (2004) and Mellor (1998) both argue for the depiction of mess as 'messy method' although Mellor, after describing mess as his method, finally abandons this struggle and opts for honest depiction rather than inclusion in a process (Mellor 2001). Law's main argument was, however, for the acceptance of methodological

pluralism and pluralism of method with mess occurring where pluralities merge. Like Law (2004), I have emphasised the need for plurality, multiple perspectives and representation of complexity in descriptions of research approaches but I saw mess as part of an approach to research, not where approaches merged. I wanted a broader description of action research that incorporated mess as a necessary part of the process. Mess should be seen as an integral part of the research approach, rather than a mess of methods.

Thomas (1998), taken by the idea that "finding out is best done by a kind of anarchy", suggested that significant additions to knowledge are characterised by departures from, as supposed to adherence to, method (p156). I would argue however, that because mess has an important purpose in enabling diversity and multiplicity to work together, a 'messy turn' should be incorporated into notions of action research alongside Schön's 'reflective turn' (1991) and the 'action turn' described by Reason and Torbert (2001). The 'messy turn' can occur at any point, and may indeed occur more than once. It is part of the hermeneutics and has epistemological importance in the forming and grounding of new understandings leading to new knowledge and change in practice.

Facilitating the 'messy turn'
A thread that runs through the research and evaluation work depicted in the eight papers in this collection is the role of the facilitator in the process. Engaging with the mess, as Mellor (1999) states, is

> "...a complex process of inquiry, involving a wide range of techniques,
> where messy is taken to mean difficult, not careless." (Mellor, 1999; abstract).

Winter (2002) suggested that a facilitator may have an important role to play in action research. My work also suggests that, for the 'messy turn' to be illuminating to co-labourers, facilitation generally plays a vital role. Engaging with dialectical processes that can genuinely prise apart familiar ideologies, help decide what is significant and move from multiple interpretations and understandings to reformed, committed action

(praxis), is complex. It can be an exciting place to be, as articulated by a recent participant in collaborative research,

> *"I just love having information and coming up with new things for it.*
> *Just love it... I've got my little drug going where I've had all the*
> *discussion and everything going. And information going and flying*
> *all over the place. And it's just like, Yessss!....Aye. I just love learning."*
> (Research Participant: Cook and Inglis, 2007:56)

but also frustrating.

> *"If you just tell me what to do, I will do it, I'm getting lost in all this*
> *thinking."* (Fieldnotes: Research Participant. Paper 7:12.)

It can be difficult for those who are directly involved in discussions that may effect the way they work in the future to take themselves from the descriptive mode to the analytical; to ask themselves how all their ideas and ways of seeing can be brought together to form a thread that will take them forward. Mellor (2001) wrote about the difficulties he experienced when faced with trying to make meaning from serendipitous thoughts contained in his original notes, thoughts and opinions.

> "I am amazed to find my notes suddenly becoming 'knowledge'. Colin [*Biott*]
> could do that, I could not. I could write diary notes, 'data', but I could not
> assert these as 'knowledge'...I believe others can assert the 'validity' of my
> 'knowledge'. It is a giant, terrifying leap for me to do that." (p471)

His supervisor facilitated this process.

Engaging in second and third person action research had led me to take on a role as facilitator, both to allow participants in the research to undertake their own thinking, learning and planning and to capture what Hogan (2002) terms

> "The serendipities that emerge from people and groups working towards
> joint goals." (p3)

In Papers 6 & 7 I began to articulate my role of the researcher-facilitator. Part of my work became to provide the environment for individual and collaborative rumination. Like Stringer (1999) I came to see that my expertise and knowledge of research

processes was often secondary to my role as a facilitator. My role as a facilitator was to open the floor to discussion in a stimulating way, to get ideas into the open, to help members of the group listen to each other, debate, reflect and make meaning from debate. Hunter et al 1993 characterise facilitation as an artful dance, with the role of the facilitator offering:

> "...an opportunity to dance with life on the edge of a sword – to be present and aware – to be with and for people in a way that cuts through to what enhances and fulfils life."
>
> (Hunter et al, 1993:1, in Hogan, 2002:51)

As Cameron (2001) points out, the role of a facilitator differs from that of chairperson at a meeting. Typically a chaired meeting focuses on reviewing progress and agreeing action by working through a strict agenda. Facilitation in the context of the work presented here has the primary intention of enabling people to interact both with their own thoughts and ideas and those of others. It is about helping people "get their wading boots on" and to do "the mucking" (Caro-Bruce, 2000:106). When using facilitation in action research the facilitator leads participants into the 'messy area', the 'swampy lowlands', and then supports them in moving forward both within the mess and with the mess. The facilitation role is not to find or establish a final truth, but to keep conversations going. It is to enable participants to recognise their own current understandings and those of others, to be more comfortable about living and working in changing environments and to experience the 'messy turn' that enable new ways of working to be revealed and articulated. The facilitator helps provide a lens for seeing and supports what Mellor (2001) termed 'the knowledge trick' i.e. helping take the process forward to analysis and meaning making. The role is, therefore, to facilitate the 'messy turn', that lively, purposeful, communicative point where inspirational new understandings are revealed, developed and articulated.

The opportunity to write this overview, to articulate my thoughts at a macro level, has enabled me to see where my work fits in terms of the practice of research, the practice of evaluation, and the development of practice itself. In my work I have identified insider knowledge as a vital and necessary component to research and evaluation if

theory is not to be separated from effective and practical application. I have highlighted the central role of the 'messy area' in this endeavour. This area, disruptive of habit and custom, is where unlearning takes place; where multiple ideas and interpretations come together to investigate current behaviours and practices and new ways of thinking are formed. It is the space where motivation for development and change is conceived and nurtured. The 'messy area' is not an easy place to be in; it is unsettling, worrying, exciting and challenging. The 'messy area' is not easily characterised by researchers but focussing with a kaleidoscopic lens on the myriad of ideas that occur in the mess of research is vital to understandings of developmental research and evaluation. Articulating the existence of 'messy areas' and 'messy turns' offers greater insights into what underpins participant understandings and theorising and what creates effective and informed transformation of practice. Including the 'messy turn' in descriptions of action research will help researchers to understand the drivers behind changed thinking and transformational action and as such needs to be overtly written into research approaches and accounts of research.

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The Importance of Mess in Action Research.

The Importance of Mess in Action Research

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ABSTRACT A small group of relatively novice action researchers from varying backgrounds gathered together to discuss their experiences of developing action research projects. During their meetings they began to identify significant divergence between what they felt was their experience of research and their interpretations of how action research was described in the literature. This article begins to investigate this divergence. It explores the researchers' struggle first to understand their patterns of research behaviour and then to describe their experience in a manner that acknowledged its importance. Could they find a way of identifying and incorporating their work within a methodology without fixing it as given practice and losing its very essence.

In 1995 I completed a higher degree dissertation using action research (AR) methodology to investigate my subject. This was a time of great relief for me, but also a certain sadness. Although this dissertation seemed to have taken up a disproportionate amount of my so called 'free time' it had also fired my imagination and I was keen to continue with some of the nascent thoughts I had been pondering over whilst in the midst of writing it. These thoughts were not necessarily about my area of work (working with parents of children with special educational needs) and the impact action research had had on it, but also around how the writing of the work onto 'hard copy' in a relatively linear, coherent form had really been at variance with my experience of research work. When written down it all seemed so obvious, the steps taken so logical, and the outcome so clear. This had not been the case whilst in the midst of the research when even the starting point was unclear to me. One of the problems I encountered whilst undertaking the research was that although I knew that there was an area of work that was causing me difficulties I could not recognise what the nub of the problem was. The bulk of the research therefore became highlighting the problem, not finding solutions to it. Whilst summaries could be suggested and certain ways forward could be tried out once I had identified the problem, this almost became a secondary matter.

The idea that I had been researching the problem and not the solution, and the recognition that the untidy nature of my research had now been tidied into a coherent form for readers, became grains of sand which

irritated my thoughts in coming months. I went on to reflect that the way in which I worked in my professional life, was not really dissimilar to the way I had conducted my action research. I am head of a pre-school service for children with special needs, working in a multidisciplinary setting. The service has many different functions, which include home visiting children and parents, providing group work in our home base, delivering nursery nurse support to children in mainstream nursery classes and schools, and delivering INSET across the city. Whilst the work emanates from a local education authority setting, coordination with health, social services, private and voluntary bodies is necessary to ensure that families receive continuity, and a coordinated delivery of service. As there are so many strands to the work, to the outsider it can look rather chaotic and disordered and some may wonder how I ever get an 'outcome' from all the jumble that is in my head, in my diary and on my desk. The old adage 'a tidy desk, a tidy mind' comes to mind. However, did I want a tidy mind? Does action research necessitate that or can having an 'untidy' mind be just as useful at times?

Following my foray into action research I was invited to be a participant in a focus group of action researchers attached to the European Union funded project Management of Organisational and Human Development (MOHD) at the University of Northumbria. Led by Colin Biott of the University, about 10 people from various backgrounds [1] were gathered together to discuss their main concerns and to identify key questions about research within organisations.

We began by considering how action research affected our own organisations and developing this theme towards how we had used action research personally. As the weeks went by the large group split into two smaller groups for part of each meeting. The main characteristic of these groups was not the nature of the person's organisation or place in the hierarchy, but on the basis of their emerging interest in the use of the research process. One group was particularly interested in using action research as a management tool to develop good practice in their establishments, whether that be from a senior or lower position in the hierarchy. The second group, whilst still having educational change and development as a goal, was interested in how action research developed personal or small group thinking within an organisation and also in the changing sense of self-identity engendered through practitioner research. I was a member of this second group.

Looking at Personal Experience
of Developing Action Research Projects

The sub group to which I, as the head of a pre-school service for children with special educational needs belonged, consisted of an educational psychologist, a homeopath, a teacher in adult education and a teacher in secondary education.

We held a number of tape recorded discussions which focussed on our personal experiences of action research (AR), and how our notions of

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personal and organisational development had been affected by AR. Within these recordings, which were transcribed and left as raw data, there were many comments about action research being a process that encouraged critical reflection of current practice. There was reference to it being:

'freeing';
'closer to the truth';
'its about openness';
'closer to reality';
'a salvation';
'a more honest approach to what people are doing that looks at problems and issues';
'streets ahead of that' (quantitative research);
'flexible enough to take your own way of working'.[2]

People also described what AR currently meant to them and what they had thought it may offer them. Their starting points for defining AR ranged from an instrumental approach to discussing planning and problem solving:

I've got a very simplistic idea of what it is. I think it is to looking at where you are and deciding where you want to get, and having some plan to get there and analysing at the end.

through a focus on sifting and crystallising:

an integral part of action research is sifting the data and allowing conclusions to crystallise realty so that sense of "Oh now I know what the problem is" is a product of your research and your enquiry ... So that seems to be the point of action research, it sort of questions partial conclusion ....

to a sense of being freed from convention:

in a sense I feel its freed me, the notion of action research, a certain way of practising, in a way it's released me from the kind of "oh I should be doing this, this or this, is this the right kind of idea ...?"

Many of these personal reflections on AR were related to general definitions of AR from the literature, particularly the idea that it could be flexible enough to fit our own different ways of working. As Kemmis notes:

Put simply, action research is the way groups of people can organise the conditions under which they can learn from their own experience. (Quoted in Hopkins, 1993, p. 45)

It seemed that, within our group, we had a set of people who were comfortable with progressing their work using the ideas of AR. However, once we started to talk about our own personal experiences of practising AR, doubts began to creep in as to whether our work fitted the conventions:

> Can I put forward my guilty secret here? I don't think I'm doing
> anything that resembles action research here. I couldn't call it
> action research, I feel I'm here under false pretences ....

another person affirmed this type of thinking:

> Absolutely, and that's what I'm saying, I couldn't do that (AR as
> had been outlined) but that was my image of what action research
> is, or was.

We all had images of AR that we felt we were not 'living up to'. So where was
it that our practice had differed from the original images we had of AR?

Finding the Departure Point

Returning to the literature, broad definitions such as:

> a personal attempt at understanding while engaged in a process of
> improvement and reform. (Hopkins, 1993, p. 44)

were tempered with qualifications. The above definition was actually
prefaced by

> action disciplined [3] by enquiry.

This 'disciplined' enquiry becomes evident as theories evolve describing
action research as a process. For example, models such as the one put
forward by Kemmis & McTaggert describe action research as a sequential
programme with defined pathways (Hopkins, 1993, p. 48). Elliott (1991)
suggests such models are:

> an excellent basis for starting to think about what action research,
> involves .... (p. 70)

but

> The General Idea should [4] be allowed to shift. Reconnaissance
> should involve analysis as well as fact finding and should
> constantly recur, in the spiral of activities ....
>
> ... one should not proceed to evaluate the effects of an action until
> one has monitored the extent to which it has been implemented.

and Ebutt (Hopkins, 1993) gives us an:

> ... appropriate way to conceive of the process of action research ...
> (p. 51)

Whether somebody agrees or disagrees with what is said above is not the
point here, but the fact that words such as should and appropriate way
begin to have connotations of 'the right way'. Once something becomes a
'model', however flexibly that model was intended to be regarded, it can be
seen by a novice researcher as the accepted way of doing AR. If you are not

doing it that way, for instance by not using reflective spirals, you may be losing validity and external credibility:

> The tight specification of process steps and cycles may trap
> teachers within a framework which they may come to depend on
> and which will consequently, inhibit independent action. (Hopkins,
> 1993, p. 54)

For instance, if we look at one of the early descriptions of the action research process, Lewin's research spiral (McNiff, 1992, p. 22) and the Kemmis & McTaggart sequence (Hopkins, 1993, p. 48) they all begin with 'PLAN', but I wanted to know how I could plan before I knew what I was looking at:

> ... if you don't know what exactly it is that is causing your
> problem, that is what the research is all about ... how can you
> plan what you are doing if your research is to find out what you
> are doing?

Perhaps now we were beginning to find part of the reason as to why our sub group felt both at home in the flexibility of AR as we perceived it, and constrained by it at the same time. Elliott (1991) recognised participants discomfort when he wrote:

> Teachers often feel threatened by 'theory' ...(this chapter) shows
> how action research resolves the theory practice issue. (p. 45)

However, our experience suggests this still is not so and as models of 'excellence were ingested from the literature we all appeared to have become less confident in our own work at some point. Having given his own suggestion of what he thought AR should be, as guided by the literature, one group member, on reflecting his own research practice, began to feel he could not make it fit:

> It's not really action research or anything like that because action
> research to me is. something where you have got a fairly clear
> plan, you do some observation and you act and you monitor it, and
> there is a fairly clear cycle.

Another group member reflecting on this point felt this could affect your project in that:

> (we think) that with action research you should be doing it in a
> systematic way ... and instead of accepting, what is you take
> what you think ought to be.

He illustrated his point by recollecting a research project into professional practice, conducted by Wagner (1987) where teachers were described as adopting 'self imperatives'. They defined for themselves what they thought they should be doing, and then tried to find that in their classrooms rather than trusting their own judgements. Furthermore, they found some of their self-imperatives' to be in tension or conflict with each other. They ended up

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in 'self imperated knots'. Had we, as action researchers, begun to find similar 'knots'?

> It (AR) was emancipating me from one system and shackling me to another ... all this cycles and steps ... it's actually repressive, it's mechanical.

and

> There is a real danger that the way you become accepted is by following other people's rules. Rules that are entirely inappropriate .... That you seek validity by doing it their way.

Once people had read about 'models' it was hard not to try to conform to them as necessary orthodoxies. At its worst the result could be that:

> revering 'great men' inteferes both with sensitivity to the data and with generating those ideas that fit and work best. It interferes because the assumption is one of forming the data to fit the doctrine. (Glaser,1978, p. 4)

Had models of the AR process prevented free and creative approaches that could yield new insights? Does knowledge of prescribed processes make it hard to be adventurous and go beyond perceived wisdoms?

> ... and then I think, well if I'd read how they have analysed it first, would I then have my own ideas, however idiosyncratic they may seem now, if we follow what everyone else has done, we may not find anything more out.

However, amongst the group there was also a discernible need for some scaffolding to help build a research project and the sense of security that can come from conforming to systems.

> When you start off on a project you have little alternative but to follow. You need to get into that machine, that mechanical way of process in order to answer the questions ....Where am I up to? Which stage of the cycle am I in? Where do I go from here?

> ... I want to ground something in the literature. I can't just be flowing free in everything do.

It would appear that we had all at some point been very aware of a need to make our work match what we had read, to find both support and justification for our work, especially when we were new to AR.

> it's often supportive when you read the literature ... it's nice to know that other people are doing it in the same way.

One person recounted how he felt when he discovered some literature that seemed to describe something akin to his experience of AR:

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> ... It's the first time I've come across it ... I breathed a big sigh of
> relief. I got a sense of identification.

Yet we were aware of the 'knots' this created. The tension between the free flow of following burgeoning ideas and the need to adhere to conventions. Were we were guilty of wanting our cake and wanting to eat it?

Trying to Describe Practice
without Fixing It and Making It Static

The group felt that a balance had to be found between:

(a) following identified models and becoming bound, as one person described it, by "the tyranny of the methodology"; and

(b) losing all sight of process and methodology.

There was a need to both have the freedom to follow our own pathways and to have our work identified within a methodology. It appeared that one way of getting around this problem had been to do the research and then try and find some literature to back it up.

> I'm trying to find examples of writers who've finally been honest
> about the research process and said what a mess it is. And people
> have been writing about that and I want to find them to justify
> what I'm doing.

At this point the group felt in need of trying to define ways of working to allow it to be assimilated into the research process if possible. They appeared to want to say "this is the way we do it!" without fixing it as such. One member came up with:

> it's a model of bumbling change supported retrospectively by
> theories,

and yet was very unhappy with the use of the word 'model' because once more it made a concrete framework that may have to fitted into, but at least it acknowledged the stumbling around that takes place. One of the difficulties with this type of post hoc rationalising was that it seemed to lack rigour in the sense that there was no immediate critical control over the knowledge. Under these circumstances incidents that matched preconceptions could be the ones most likely to be utilised and slotted into the picture and critical incidents that lurked in the shadow of current knowledge, lost.

The group had expressed the need for a model, but one which would incorporate the 'bumbling change' period. Much of the research literature seemed to portray rather neat models that whilst allowing for some revisiting and re-evaluation, did not seem to describe the period of complete jumble that people in the group had experienced at certain times during their research. Most of us felt that this was the fundamental bit in the whole process yet to the outsider it may look like a haphazard 'lucky dip' process. We collected data, observed and we seemed to be looking at everything,

putting it all in the melting pot, and thinking of all sorts of different plans, theories etc, but, at this point in the process could not explain why. McNiff (1992) refers to this as:

> symptomatic of action research that this sort of explosion of ideas and problem areas will occur. (p. 28)

and describes her own difficulties in this area as 'Hydra-like' with so many heads that:

> I found at first that I was quite confused as to what constituted my main enquiry, how many of the 'subsidiary' problem areas I should attend to .... (p. 35)

This explosion of ideas and thoughts is hard to map because many of them don't actually go anywhere. One group member pointed out that some cultures have a native language that uses more active words rather than concrete collective nouns.

> They don't say there's a forest out there, they say there's a lot of treeing over there ... those trees are treeing.

This treeing seemed a picturesque way of describing the active continuing narrative of our approach. When 'treeing' there were lots of branches to be explored and it allowed for growth. This was one reason for beginning research with an inclusive approach rather than selecting a predetermined focus as it gave permissions to explore all the branches. But can you, in reality, explore all these routes. Do you, in fact, need to? People in the groups expressed a need to break down the questions their research posed into 'bite sized chunks' to enable them to make headway. It highlighted for us the need for sorting and streamlining ideas to find the important areas for investigation. Could we just follow the branches of our research that appeared to be most promising or would this just result in the lure of the familiar? Was there an analytical means of sorting out the ways forward?

Finding a Starting Point Amongst the 'Mess'

Barry Turner (Bryman, 1988) dealing with a similar problem in qualitative research, describes his approach to studying organisations by using the word 'botanising'. He says that "botanising allows shapes and patterns to emerge from the 'initial confusion'":

> to observe and begin to sort out and name the social flora and fauna to be found in the setting concerned, so that in the process, sharper research questions could develop. (p. 109)

The group felt that the real learning for action researchers lay in the botanising period. It was when we did the untrammelled thinking, the sorting out of things. It involved using our knowledge, experience, judgement and intuition to find the pivotal learning point, a watershed, the 'punctum point' to move us forward.

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I borrow the word 'punctum' from Roland Barthes who, when looking at pictures that most attracted his attention, realised that they contained an element that 'punctuates' and 'disturbs' the familiar aspect of the work. The word he used for this was 'punctum'. The 'punctum point' moves the interest from passive to active and intense. It sparks off new trains of thought. It is the element that pricks, the sensitive point, the little detail that, easily overlooked, suddenly becomes the focus of the picture and "whilst remaining a detail fills the whole picture"(Barthes, 1993, p. 45). It is more than just a focal point. A focal point draws you in and holds you, this point fires you off into new orbit. From something that is flat and observable, it leads you to something that is vivid, alive and active, although somewhat less tangible. The part where we were submerged in data, thoughts, feelings, ideas and theories that as yet had not crystallised can be perceived as the familiar awaiting the illumination of a punctum point. I have deliberately use 'a' rather than 'the' because, even if a person is considering all the variables they have amassed, we recognise that we never have finite knowledge. A group member described the difficulties in catching the picture when things are always changing:

> I don't think you can ever have the whole because there is always
> something that is brewing and people don't always know what
> they have now ... but having enough, knowing that you have
> enough, is a fairly critical expert quality/ability.

Perhaps the important words above are 'knowing' and 'expert quality/ability'. Is that how we find the punctum point? Is it by using a 'sense' of where the collected observables are leading us that we unearth meaning from the mass of variables before us and begin to make interpretations? Handy (1993), when talking about the development of organisations suggested that:

> most individuals, by the time they reach maturity, have built up an
> array of concepts which they use to interpret the data they
> observe. (p. 16)

Ambiguity surfaces once again in the word 'interpret'. That is where the outcome depends on the understanding of the individual's thinking and sorting processes. Some of the words we have used as a group to describe how we made meaning from our 'mess' include knowledge, experience, judgement, creativity and intuition. Similarly, Stenhouse (1978, p. 22), talked about the 'refinement of judgement' using 'retrospective generalisations' from case studies to inform practice. These aspects are difficult to represent in an observable, public form. We therefore wondered if it is that, because these areas are so intangible, whilst acknowledging the difficulties, the literature has tended to gloss over their importance? This 'sorting of ideas' process is far more difficult to describe and categorise than practical outcomes and yet so important if a project is to be appropriately centred. (This remained true whether the group members were faced with finding the pertinent question they wished to ask to define their research

project, or whether they were involved in discovering the answers to that question.)

McNiff (1992) noted that Elliott attempted to outline some of the difficulties imposed by the apparent neatness of models when, in his spiral depictions of the action research process, he introduced some of the 'ors' and 'eithers' that muddy the waters. Ebutt, also quoted in McNiff (1992) recognised:

> the thrust of Elliott's three statements is an attempt ... to recapture some of the "messiness" of the action research cycle. (p. 31)

Attempting to Define the Messy Bit

When trying to say what happened as they entered into a research project people in our group used words such as mess, bumbling, jumble, untidy, free flowing, thoughts without set outcomes to characterise the 'searching for meaning' period:

> a lot of it is casting around and then something grabs you.

> I've got the piece of the jigsaw but I've lost the top of the box, so I don't know quite what these bits add up to. I can feel the strong shape, but I don't know how certain bits go.

In discussion with another group member I began to consider the idea that what was going on was actually 'heuristic' research, where heuristic is defined as guided trial and error. The group member above felt he had some kind of framework for his puzzle, but at the outset he didn't have the picture on the top of the box. He would then try lots of different patterns until he saw the picture emerge. However, some of us didn't feel we even had a framework as a guide at the outset.

I asked a mathematician friend of mine about how he approached his research. Rather than writing it down, he drew his answer:
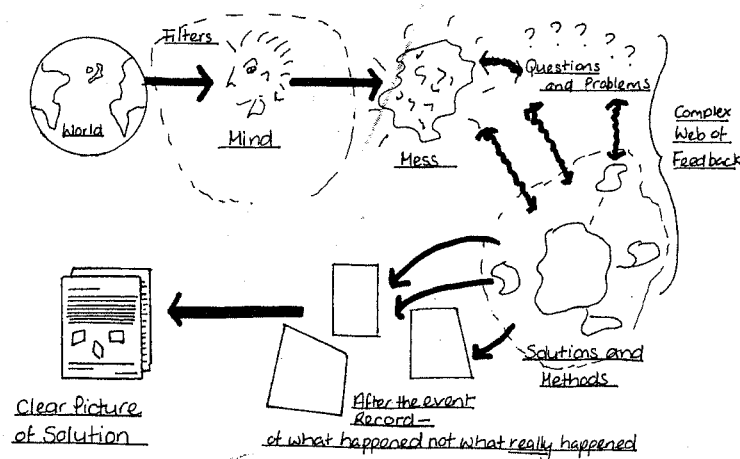
His 'mess', 'perceptual filters', seemed to occur in the same place as mine, that is before you have a plan. It seemed that maybe we were all trying to describe the 'collecting ideas and finding a focus' part, the finding the nub of the problem. We were trying to find what the searching consisted of. We were describing it by using words such as messing on, bumbling, transforming or phrases like 'finding a moving unity'. We used phrases such as 'peeking into practice', 'using our intuition and instinct', 'letting things arise and bubble', 'reflecting and staying reflective'. The thinking was embedded in observation, chatting and talking with others both about the practice and the process. In the group discussions we identified our belief in the importance of this part of the research process:

> It is important this talking – because it's the thinking isn't it? It's this vague bumbling along process that nevertheless is a process that allows our unconscious thoughts to materialise.

> It's about how do you hold yourself as a researcher, as a practitioner, in the state where outcomes haven't crystallised yet. Mess is skilled – very highly skilled process – experience, expertise and know how, sensitivity to pick up things is a very highly skilled process.

> flickering all the time between theory and practice, theory and practice...the idea resolves, crystallises, dissolves, crystallises, dissolves.

So is 'mess' a flickering between the suspected and the known through a talking and thinking period around data gathered that allows germane questions to materialise? Is 'mess' how we access our 'tacit knowledge', that knowledge which, according to Polyani's writing on Personal Knowledge (1962, quoted in Hopkins, 1993, p. 73), we can't articulate?

> The most pertinent feature of Poyani's work is the concept of tacit knowledge, the knowledge we cannot articulate. He suggests that we know a great deal more than we can put into words, and that we sense and understand more that we can describe or explain.
> (Hopkins, 1993, p. 73)

Is 'mess' the process of following this zig-zag path of crossing from the intuitive to analytical mode of thinking and back that helps identify pertinent knowledge?

The group discussions had helped increase our belief and confidence in the untidy process we were describing and statements about what was necessary to encourage such a process started to be formulated:

> being comfortable about working without outcomes ... we haven't got an end, its a process

and

> It's about trust in the process to deliver without hurrying to a
> conclusion,

but

> I think we've got the problems of doing it this way, the problems
> and dilemmas of justifying to others how we do it in a way that is
> not linear and outcome driven.

Our world is not systematic and linear, one thing does not lead directly to another. As Willem van der Eyken (29 September 1996) said in a different context:

> a single cause does not lead to a specific affect and yet in research
> and evaluation we tend to behave as it it did.

McNiff recognised how rigid, linear models lack the flexibility to deal with moving situations. She felt existing models "simply do not accommodate spontaneous, creative episodes". New things coming in are put to one side because they are not what the project was designed to cover, and yet it can be these very things that come in to confuse the research that contain the next step forward. As a group member noted:

> the change that has the impact is not the change that we planned
> for, it is the change that comes out of the mess and the muddle.

Referring to Wagner's teachers, our group member seemed to remember:

> their problems seemed to arise from the fact that life goes on, it is
> messy, and they felt it should be different.

Tidying Away the Mess

When wondering why this perceived gap between practice and published models had arisen, one group member went on to say that he felt:

> there is a whole tradition actually, not in teacher research but in
> professional's research, of not admitting things, because
> researchers don't have the freedom to admit the problems that
> teachers (as researchers) have...as a teacher it's a function of our
> research to express the inadequacies but a researcher doesn't
> have that freedom...(to admit inadequacies in their research).
> Instead we get the descriptions of systematic research, systematic
> rigour.

Another member suggested that "the 'mess' gets missed out of accounts for professional clarity and tidiness".

In a snippet from a Radio 4 broadcast, I heard a doctor describing his research practice. He explained that when he was analysing things in the laboratory he was always thinking it could be this, it could be that, I don't really know, I'll try this or probably that. In the laboratory his remit was to

be open and reflective, and to look for the unexpected. When he saw his patient, so as not to undermine their confidence, he said "this is what is wrong and this is what we are going to do to put it right" without doubt in his voice. Doubts got tidied away. The final account no longer included all possibilities but made the probables definitive. He had designed an outcome to match the need of the recipient. Perhaps one of the pressures on 'professional' researchers is that external imperatives demand tidy outcomes. 'Rigour' is misconstrued as 'neat'. Definite answers are wanted even if it means some of the questions are ignored. One of our group members felt that this could be why:

> accounts you read about research ... seem to me so unfair to the
> truth, they are so worked on.

Yet how do you write up that complicated bit that involves all that thinking and sifting? Is it that because we don't have a way that we can make it intelligible to others, which enables a reader to follow our unravelling of a situation, we describe it in a clear, perfectly linked, linear manner. Clara Park (1967) when writing about how she and her husband tried to understand and unravel the mysteries which they felt surrounded the 'fairy being' that was their autistic child, before they had known anything about autism, said of her writing about the process:

> As I describe I articulate, I divide into parts, I imply relationships, I
> put one thing first and not another. I cannot avoid doing this; I
> must articulate to write things down at all. I must analyse and as I
> analyse I falsify. Experienced as analysed is not longer experience
> as lived. (p. 87)

And The Outcome of All This Is ...?

There appeared to be a perceived dichotomy between the need to have a model and the need to be free to think adventurously. Gareth Morgan in his book Images of Organisation (1986) extolled the developmental importance of inquiry driven action which he characterised as being in contrast with traditional approaches which he felt tended to impose goals, objectives and targets. It was important to find a method that did not crush or simply lose ideas and creativity:

> it is important to devise means where intelligence and direction
> can emerge from ongoing organisational processes. (p. 92)

If we believe that thinking adventurously and using these spontaneous creative episodes', otherwise known to our group as the 'messy' bits, is where our expertise is used and learning takes place, but that we also feel the need for a model to follow, perhaps the answer lies in greater acknowledgement of it as part of the research process. So often we felt unable to interpret what actually went on within the thinking, sifting and crystallising period, and how we had reached a decision to take a certain

pathway within our research. We did not have the words to explain how, without necessarily initially having a clearly identified problem or purpose, we could collect data information and transform it from its seemingly incoherent state into something that shone a light onto our work that allowed new possibilities to develop. This has left us with the difficulty of expressing our practice of research as it occurs when we only have words such as bumbling, messing, treeing etc., that have no academic status. The group believed that the taming of this mess section demonstrated a 'professional maturity' in the evolution of their research, planning and processing of decisions, but appeared to have reached a lexical gap in describing it.

Whilst the 'active noun' for this aspect our work still patently alluded us we were talking in terms of recognising it as part of a process and did feel that:

> it's more systematic to admit that you're bumbling than to dress
> up your bumbling as something else. That's just plain dishonest.

> I now look less for certainty and I'm more confident in that.

> I'd like to be able to explain the messy bit to others in a way that
> they would recognise how important I see it - as vital to the
> thinking and learning from what you have done bit.

If we miss out the 'messy' bit, if we tidy everything up to fit in a system, the creative part of our work can be lost. By only describing the tangible and certain do we hide the essence of our professional work; the development of the thinking process?

When writing about people in organisations, Charles Handy (1993) celebrates uncertainty:

> As individual human beings we should take delight in this lack of
> certainty since it carries with it a guarantee of ultimate
> independence. (p. 13)

If the reason that we are struggling with this problem is not that other action researchers don't experience the same process, but due to a variety of reasons, they tidy up the process as it is written down, should we not be encouraging more revelations about this messy period in the literature?

... More Questions to Ask Ourselves

The difficulties our focus group encountered when looking at the models of action research appear to lie in three main areas:

1. We had experienced, when undertaking research, a phase in the process that involved the thinking about and sorting of ideas and data that we could only describe as the 'messy bit', the 'jumbly section', etc. and yet we considered it to be a fundamentally important part of the research process. It was the part that gave it life and meaning.

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Question: can we describe the 'messy' experience honestly and succinctly, reflecting its breadth and depth, but without fixing it as a particular process to be slavishly followed?

2. We recognised the need, as novice action researchers, for utilising models. Conceptual frameworks are necessary to avoid reducing the work to a collection of superficial assumptions that would hold no validation as research. However, we were aware that by strictly following existing research structures as portrayed we risked narrowing the focus of our work and possibly limiting the opportunities for developing original and novel pathways.

Question: how, as novice action researchers, could we both utilise prescribed action research models, but also give ourselves permission to break free from perceived structures to develop certain processes or parts of the process? Would including 'mess' as part of the process give people permission to lose the thread for a while and explore with confidence?

3. We began to suspect that there was a gap between literature and practice. Whilst there was some allusion to confusion and mess, accounts of action research generally tidied away this aspect of the work.

Question: can we develop a closer description of the practice of action research by including descriptions of the messy thinking, jumbling, botanising, sifting and crystallising experience? This description would develop the concept that professional knowledge, judgement, tacit knowledge, intuition, and professional maturity are important when choosing a way forward amidst data gathering and analysis. Data does not give out its own meaning, finding that meaning is the researchers art. It is in more than bald facts alone. As Schatzman & Strauss, quoted in Turner (1988) commented:

> the data do not speak for themselves they only hint at something if
> you are able to hear. (Turner, 1988, p. 116)

Michael Eraut, in September 1996, described how he saw people settling into schemes of experience and how trying to adjust these schemes of experience is a challenge. Perhaps now is the time to try and take up this challenge in describing the action research process more expansively and candidly. To get this mess out into the open and as such, allow it to be critically scrutinised for its intrinsic worth and what it has to offer. Perhaps this is merely the next part of the action research spiral, that having collected data about mess, and investigated it, we have discovered a section that needs more reflection and more investigation We need to begin:

> transforming the contents of consciousness into a public form so
> that they can be examined and shared. (Simons, 1994, p. 9)

as I believe we still have, using the words of Stenhouse, a need for a "theory of action as it is experienced" (p. 23).

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Notes

[1] Head teacher; deputy head teacher; classroom teacher from the primary sector; teacher from the secondary sector; educational psychologist; further education lecturer; homeopath; senior nurse in adult mental health; nurse lecturer/practitioner in child psychiatric health plus a head of a preschool service for children with special needs.

[2] All unmarked references in the text come from the taped data of Focus Group conversations within the MOHD project.

[3] my emphasis.

[4] my emphasis.

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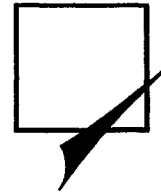
Local Evaluation in a National Early Years Excellence Centres Pilot Programme

Integrating Performance Management and Participatory Evaluation

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This article is focused on the evaluation of one of New Labour's area-based initiatives in the UK. It traces local evaluators' changing concerns in the face of increasing control from a national evaluation programme. It shows how strains are being felt in relation to evaluators' roles, timescales and approaches to reporting. A pre-specified framework of indicators and a template for reporting are tending to concentrate effort upon finding the 'looked for' or confirming the 'asked for', at the expense of new learning. We look at the difficulties in trying to integrate participatory evaluation and performance management, and in particular in trying to make evaluation meaningful and educative, rather than a bureaucratic burden, for local participants.

KEYWORDS: early years; learning; national and local evaluation; performance management; policy

This article explores issues in the evaluation of the national Early Years Excellence Centres Pilot Programme in the UK. The programme is comprised of a range of different local projects, and as with similar 'New Labour' policy making/policy learning experiments, it poses challenging questions for both national and local evaluators. For national evaluators, who have been commissioned to gain rapid feedback on what seems to be working well, a key challenge is to enable local centres to influence the overall programme. At the same time, local evaluators are having to try to sustain local participatory evaluation as well as serve the needs of national evaluators and carry out regular monitoring against common indicators.

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In this article, we discuss tensions which arise from the latter challenge. Our purpose is to contribute to a contemporary debate about inter-relationships between two movements which have come together since the 1990s: performance management and evaluation. After defining terms and discussing recent contributions to the debate, we provide brief background information, and outline the planning and early work on our local evaluation project. We describe how we agreed a strategy with local managers and stakeholders, and then show how that was subsequently affected by a new national evaluation framework.

We go on to explain how a national evaluation specification began to tip the balance, in favour of evaluation for accountability at the expense of evaluation for development. We wanted to continue to emphasize evaluation for development, and especially to promote communication amongst project participants, to support development based on local people having 'a say', and to keep open possibilities to try out changes of direction. We discuss how new national specifications introduced tensions around local evaluators' roles, local plans, timescales and approaches to reporting. We trace how we have struggled, so far, to integrate performance management and participatory evaluation, and we discuss the transitions in which we have found ourselves. We conclude by emphasizing how it is timely to have more case studies of interplay between local and national evaluation, and to problematize the assumption underlying evidence-based policy-making, that what is found to work in one place will also work in another.

Perspectives on Integrating Performance Management and Evaluation

Blalock (1999) has referred to 'performance management' and 'evaluation' in the USA as two movements with different histories, 'performance management' having grown from the needs of strategic management and 'evaluation' being an off-shoot of applied social research. For her, performance management means a nearly exclusive emphasis upon outcomes of programmes 'frequently in the absence of a commitment to collect information about why and how those results occurred' (p. 117). Its strength is in providing 'important short-term, quick turn-around information for tracking progress against stated goals' (p. 142). In contrast, evaluation seeks to provide evidence for enhancing understanding in a broader sense. She proposes a new integrated, inter-disciplinary culture combining both performance management and evaluation.

Davies (1999), adviser to the European Court of Auditors on performance audit, evaluation and financial management, has suggested how such integration might be achieved. He proposes three main ways of achieving complementarity between evaluation and performance management: first, by paying balanced attention to process and results; second, by cultivating learning in the sense of assuming that 'we don't know how to do it at all' and we need to learn; and third, by treating information as a shared resource rather than as an instrument of hierarchical power. He advocates that we 'attempt to foster an approach, a mindset, that uses indicators to elicit questions rather than to provide answers' (p. 158).

Greene (1999), however, sees performance measures as inadequate for

representing the quality of programmes, and for advancing 'the ideals of deliberative democracy' (p. 160). She argues that programme quality is too complex to be reduced to end points, because it is irreducibly pluralistic, and it is not available as an objective, permanent measure of a fixed reality. For this reason she advocates a 'democratising vision of evaluation', of using forms of representation that invite dialogue amongst all legitimate stakeholders rather than serve single interests. For Greene, evaluators' responsibilities go beyond technical skills, so that they are accountable for fostering conversations involving all interests, and for ensuring that representations of programme quality catch its changing, complex inter-subjectivity.

In the UK, experience of evaluating the government's 'Best Value' pilot programme has led Martin and Sanderson (1999) to ask whether it is really possible for evaluators to 'reconcile the multiple political, managerial and societal objectives associated with the new crop of pilot projects' in New Labour policy making. They have been required to 'work alongside local authorities to facilitate early identification of successful approaches' (p. 249) and to contribute to national policy making. They outline three problems associated with measuring outcomes. These problems arise from difficulties in establishing reliable baselines; difficulties of attributing changes to the effects of the pilot; and knowing what relative 'value' should be placed on different kinds of outcome. They point to legitimate ambiguities and competing views about objectives, and to suspicion at the local level about the extent to which they can really help to shape the overall framework. Martin and Sanderson argue for an 'argumentative–subjectivist' approach, emphasizing dialogue and negotiation between tiers of government and promoting policy learning, rather than the 'rational–objectivist' analysis favoured by ministers and officials during the 1980s.

Nevertheless, Helsby and Saunders (1993) have argued that it is important to try to work with rather than ignore performance indicators, otherwise 'professionally relevant indicators of good practice will be overwhelmed by externally directed imperatives for quantitative output measures' (p. 76). They have warned, however, that national performance indicators can lead to de-professionalization of teachers, distort local priorities for evaluation and fail to demonstrate causal relations. Based on their evaluation programme for a Technical and Vocational Education Initiative, they have suggested how indicators can be made professionally relevant. We found their categories of 'enabling', 'process' and 'outcomes' indicators useful when we negotiated our strategy with local managers. Subsequently, we found that the national evaluation programme of Early Excellence Centres (EEC) was to be shaped by a similar framework.

Linking Local and National Evaluations

The Early Years Excellence Centres Pilot Programme is only one of a collection of New Labour's area-based initiatives aiming to tackle social exclusion through partnerships and multi-agency work. Each of these combines local and national evaluations and the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions has commissioned a two-year project to support better co-ordination and develop a

framework for the monitoring and evaluation of the long-term effectiveness of co-ordinated working. The project is investigating nine current initiatives such as Education Action Zones (EAZ), Health Action Zones (HAZ) and the Crime Reduction Programme (Grimshaw and Stewart, 1999). This research study does not include the Early Years Excellence Centres Programme, but Grimshaw and Stewart's discussion of the interface between national and local evaluations is highly relevant to our argument. They have explored whether there is a mechanism to ensure that local evaluations are useful for national evaluators, while avoiding duplication and over-evaluation, and have asked to what extent national evaluations seek to impose a common framework on local evaluation.

They refer to attempts to strike a balance between central requirements and local discretion. In an example from Health Action Zones they describe how teams of local academics, HAZ staff and members of target communities worked together on a standard survey to be used by all HAZs. A mutual benefit is that local HAZs involve and train members of the community as interviewers and, in return, national evaluators get extensive survey data. In another example, national evaluators for the New Start programme, another government initiative to combat social exclusion, are said to have tried to design a broad evaluation framework with minimum prescription needed to ensure consistency, yet with enough flexibility to cater for local evaluation plans.

Grimshaw and Stewart do, however, identify problems at local levels arising from the co-existence of national and local evaluation and from lack of knowledge about what evaluation is for. As a consequence, some local projects pay only marginal or tokenistic attention to evaluation once a bid has been accepted. They suggest that if evaluation from area-based initiatives is to feed into mainstream policies, it must be a tool for learning and not a 'checking-up' procedure. Evaluation should be demystified, and there should be commitment at all levels to discussing and using evaluations, including what is unpalatable to central government.

The National Early Years Excellence Centres Pilot Programme

The UK Early Years Excellence Centres Pilot Programme arose from the White Paper *Excellence in Schools* (DfEE, 1997) which set out that:

> all young children should have access to high quality early years education, delivered through partnership between the LEA [Local Education Authority], private and voluntary sectors.

According to the White Paper, Early Years Excellence Centres had to demonstrate

> ... good practice in education, childcare and integrated services and provide training and a focus for dissemination ... centres should build on existing good practice and, as beacons of excellence, be catalysts for further development of early years services and innovation over a wider area.

Bids were encouraged from a variety of agencies. As we began our evaluation work, 11 centres had been established and by 2000 the number had increased to 25.

In the next part of the article we describe and discuss how our own local approach and a national evaluation strategy have interacted over a two-year period. We present this chronologically to catch and convey the unfolding and unfinished story of interplay between contingencies, competing priorities and principles of evaluation.

The main focus of the article is the evaluation of an Early Years Excellence Centre in an old rural coalfield area in a large county in the north of England. The successful bid outlined a project that would have main bases in one coastal town and two villages. These three bases now link with schools, playgroups and other forms of provision across the communities. The aim was to develop a network of early years providers that would offer improved childcare, education and family support to this isolated, economically distressed community.

Setting up a Local Evaluation Strategy Prior to the Imposition of a National Framework: October 1998

In setting up a local evaluation strategy, our main concern was to help managers and participants to develop and strengthen the centre. From previous experience, we recognized the importance of making our approach to evaluation consistent with the aims and principles of the project itself and so, like Greene (1999) we emphasized the importance of promoting local 'participatory citizenship'. At the outset, six aims were agreed with local project managers. These were to:

- help to establish and maintain communication amongst project participants by supporting 'enabling conversations' about programme quality and direction;
- help clarify indicators and criteria which are seen by stakeholders as appropriate to accounting for success;
- assist project managers, steering group members and participants to take a reflective stance towards the project and its activities;
- feed discussions of stakeholders by providing evidence, raising issues for discussion and suggesting foci for shared deliberation;
- provide opportunities for project members to develop skills of evaluation based on a strong stakeholder focus;
- assist the project manager in seeing any possibilities for changes of direction in the project.

These aims relate to two of Chelimsky's three perspectives on evaluation: evaluation for development and evaluation for accountability (Chelimsky and Shadish, 1997).

The local evaluation team was predisposed to evaluation for development. We wanted to help to set the conditions in which indicators of quality would emerge from actual work and discussions. We believed that indicators developed in this way would be meaningful, practical and enabling.

From the outset, we anticipated that we would have to try to disentangle, and seek to understand, complex judgements of quality, ranging from policy makers' concerns about cost-effectiveness and explicit targets for the whole programme, to participants' implicit sense of what is worthwhile, based upon direct involvement. As Dahlberg et al. (1999) warn:

> work with quality needs to be contextualised, spatially and temporally, and to recognise cultural and other significant forms of diversity.

A key challenge was to try to convey progress of the project in a form that would integrate different ways of judging quality and standards. We wanted to avoid the kind of oversimplification that tends to arise from merely addressing different concerns separately, but like Greene (1999) we also recognized that:

> Determining (these) standards and determining which stakeholders participate in decisions about program standards constitute the challenging social-political dimensions of our craft. (p. 163)

When we began our work there were no specific requirements from central government about local evaluations other than the original specification asking bidders to outline their own plans for local monitoring and evaluation. Despite the absence of national requirements at this point in time, we did anticipate that the Early Years Excellence Centres would be called upon to provide evidence of outcomes before the next election or even sooner.

For this reason, a key feature of our local evaluation plan was to help project managers and other participants to identify how they might evaluate the achievement of their own aims. At this stage, and before we had the national framework of indicators, we wanted to establish internal accountability based on local understandings and expressions of quality, and then to relate this to a broad national agenda. This reflects Helsby and Saunders' (1993) emphasis on the importance of what participants would expect to see if they succeeded in achieving their objectives. This notion of 'accountability' underpinned our intention to promote and support 'enabling conversations' about direction, quality and standards.

We had already seen that even formal, written statements meant different things to different people in this loosely knit network of LEA, private and voluntary early years provision. Many people had been used to working with limited interaction between different agencies and services. If evaluation was going to encourage genuine commitment to improving standards, it had to help foster a collective sense of accountability rather than engender individual compliance or fear of failure.

For this reason two related tactics seemed particularly important at the start of the project. First, to focus on short-term goals and recognize the importance of putting things in place. Second, that the evaluation had to 'make an account' of what was being done from the beginning and to help develop a history of the project.

Carrying out the Preliminary Phase of the Local Evaluation: November 1998–February 1999

We agreed with local managers that local evaluation would aim both to 'account for' the effectiveness of the project and also to 'make an account of' its processes of improvement. We were trying to build trust and genuine engagement against the background of 'underclass' discourse, as represented, for example, in the original specification and bid document. This was a discourse that emphasized inadequacy, lack of motivation, low confidence and suspicion of new initiatives. In these circumstances, we were aware of the dangers of being beguiled by contrived participation and of manipulating local interests to address imposed agendas.

We were also aware that we might lose critical edge through over-involvement in helping to build the project. This was described by one member of the evaluation team as 'getting into a warm bath' with the project team. Wolcott (1977) expressed a similar view. He recognized his own tendency, as an anthropologist, to side with the 'colonised', or the underdog, when carrying out an evaluation. This meant he became more interested, for example, in questions of how teachers stopped technocrats from meddling in their work, rather than addressing technocrats' questions about why teachers resisted change.

At the beginning, we agreed with local centre managers that we would develop the evaluation in phases, with each phase building on knowledge gained from the previous phase. An evaluation sub-group was set up, and this included parents and members of the community as well as members from across the range of services within the network. We also agreed that the scale, scope and duration of each subsequent phase would be negotiated as the project progressed.

The 'Preliminary' Local Report: February 1999

In consultation with the evaluation sub-group, we identified a range of stakeholders to cover the perspectives of professionals, the community, families, funders and service managers. Thirty-eight semi-structured interviews were then conducted by the evaluation team between November 1998 and January 1999, and four themes were subsequently identified: communication issues within the project; issues of inclusion and access; participation and partnerships issues; and training, development and support.

A report was prepared which illustrated and discussed the issues, pointed to possible barriers to be overcome, and identified participants' own indicators against which to check progress. At this stage we adopted the categories of indicators proposed by Helsby and Saunders (1993). These indicators were of three main types – 'enabling', 'process' and 'outcome' indicators. *'Enabling indicators'* referred to what had been 'set up' or put in place so far. These included facilities, resources such as establishing a crèche, and setting up a forum for discussion. Getting things in place was particularly important to stakeholders we interviewed in the preliminary phase of the evaluation. *'Process indicators'* referred to what and how things were being done and what kinds of things were being tried to translate principles into action. For example, we explored the processes by which

a GP, a health promotion officer and a health visitor had asked local people what they wanted in the Healthy Living Centre and the local Early Years Excellence Centre. *'Outcome indicators'* referred, at this stage, to anticipated performance achievements of the project. Those being seen as likely to be important included, for example, improved educational attainment and increased rates of participation, and also less tangible indicators such as raised self-esteem and enhanced multi-disciplinary understanding.

Project managers and the steering group found the preliminary report helpful and challenging. It was our first attempt to show we had 'been there' and 'heard the music not just read the notes'. We had wanted to provide some insights without getting in the way of deeper understandings of what was going on, and we wanted to see whether such a report could be used to support communication across the community.

Immediately after this report had been presented, our work was overtaken by arrangements for a visit from a team carrying out research to inform the national evaluation of the whole Early Years Excellence Centre Programme.

The Interface between Local and National Evaluation Teams: March 1999

In March 1999, shortly after we had presented the preliminary evaluation report, a team involved in piloting a national evaluation strategy visited the centre and explained how they would propose a national evaluation strategy to encompass both local and national concerns. They also talked about developing contextual, process and outcome indicators, which matched our work already underway. They said that the national evaluation pilot was trying to identify indicators that would reflect the nature of each centre as well as establish core indicators that would allow the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) to have some common reference points. The team had already developed an approach to be tried across the 11 centres currently in place, and their exploratory visit to collect data was planned for April 1999.

Whilst the local evaluation sub-group welcomed the tenor of the proposed national evaluation, it was uneasy about whether an external template would catch and convey all of what was being done in these early stages. At the point when the national team arrived, new buildings had not been started, and as yet there were no new crèches, playgroups, nurseries or extra facilities in place. At this time, existing childcare/education settings were only just beginning to link their work and to find out about the Early Years Excellence Centre's aims. Our intention as local evaluators had been to help communication across agencies, enhancing access, inclusion and participation. The local evaluation sub-group wanted to discuss with the national team how these issues could be given due weight within the national evaluation framework and so requested an extra meeting with the team prior to their 'data collection' visit.

At this meeting it was suggested that some aspects of the emerging national evaluation strategy seemed to be of little relevance to the work currently going on at the local centre. One example of this was the proposal to do 'child tracking'.

At this point the only childcare/education facilities available were original community resources which had not yet been affected by the new 'Excellence Centre'. If we had tried to fit 'child tracking' to local circumstances, we felt we would have been led by the needs of the national evaluation exercise itself, thus distorting the current needs of the project. Tracking was a fixed part of the national team's agenda, but local project managers could see little value in focusing on something that was neither timely nor relevant to their current work. Furthermore, it might raise levels of suspicion amongst participants.

As a compromise, it was agreed that the national team would visit a mother and toddler group where it could observe activities and talk to parents. In this way the team could observe children *in situ*, but concentrate more on how participants were viewing the work and on their future plans.

This bargaining and trade-off had meant that, at least, both parties had been told about the needs of the other. We accepted that the national team's agenda went beyond the immediate scope and scale of the local project to produce an evidence base for national policy making. At the same time, we made the point that a national evaluation programme would have to acknowledge and support diversity rather than impose apparent consensus. As Stake (1997) has noted, not only is quality plural, varied and contingent, but our views of it change: 'Quality is seldom rooted in firm ground, with meanings we can count on, with standards we are sure of. We are of two minds, many minds' (Stake, 1997: 41).

The Impact of New Specifications for National Evaluation in September 1999

New specifications for a three-year National Evaluation Project became available in September 1999 (Pascal et al., 1999), one year after we had begun our local evaluation. From this point new problems began to arise. These problems came, partly, from a chasm between the huge demands being made and the modest scope and funding of the local evaluation project, and partly from an externally prescribed framework. The allocation of areas to be evaluated at specified times also felt constraining. Up to this point, the challenge locally had been to devise a methodology that engaged participants in shaping their centre and agreeing criteria for judging its success, and then to set this within a national agenda for improvement. The proposal for a national evaluation both supported and distorted our work in terms of: establishing roles as local evaluators; agreeing plans and timescales; and reporting.

Establishing Roles of Local Evaluators in the Context of a National Framework

Pascal et al. (1999) describe local evaluators as a crucial link in a national evaluation strategy, able to 'move between local and national evaluation priorities and link their work at both levels' (p. 97). In addition to aspects of the role that were already envisaged and agreed at local level, it was being suggested that local evaluators would liaise with national evaluators to ensure coverage and

appropriateness of the local evaluation plan and 'pass on the local evaluation data to the national evaluators' (p. 97). Local evaluators would be expected to 'support and validate self-evaluation processes in the centre, and analyse comprehensive data on all centre services'.

Like Greene (1999) we continued to be concerned that we should be accountable, not just for technical expertise, but for enabling democratizing conversations amongst legitimate stakeholders. Yet in the national evaluation specification, the only reference to local communication is that the local evaluators should 'participate in local dissemination processes'. The term 'dissemination' implies that findings or ideas should be passed on to non-participants in other parts of the region. Whilst we saw such dissemination as important in the medium and longer term, we were much more concerned, at this stage, with how we could help participants to work together.

We were concerned that the proposed role for local evaluators would prevent the questioning of assumptions, such as those underlying the national framework of indicators. Given the tight framework, it seemed increasingly unlikely that local evaluators would construct concepts of quality which were shaped by changing and multiple perspectives in the local community.

As local evaluators, we continue to question the extent to which we will be able to move smoothly between local and national evaluation priorities. In future, we might be able to adjust ourselves to meet the packaged requirements of the national evaluators, but this may be at the expense of failing to attune our ears to tacit local judgements. In trying to face in both directions, we may fail to hear quieter voices, and it would contradict our guiding principles if participants' voices were left unheeded, or even unheard, in the hidden corners of the project.

Local Plans and Timescales in the Context of a National Framework

Pascal et al. (1999) propose that local evaluation plans be produced annually through partnership between centre staff and local and national evaluators. These annual plans should

> contain detailed and timed programmes of evaluation action to be undertaken by the key participants in the evaluation process, the common indicators to be covered, the cost effectiveness methods to be used, a schedule for the production of findings and costing of the evaluation process. (p. 95)

Local evaluation plans are to be submitted each year to the national evaluators for agreement.

It is proposed that the plans should cover 11 core indicators each year and a whole set of 22 indicators over the three years of the project. Some flexibility and some choice are acknowledged to meet local circumstances, but local plans 'should ensure that evaluative data on the whole range of common indicators will have been collected and analysed by year three of the national evaluation' (p. 96). The difficulty is not in planning itself, but around the template, which requires an

annual programme of activities rather than allows for adaptations steered and scheduled by a local evaluation sub-committee. It pre-determines the indicators to be covered every year, thus reducing, but not totally eliminating, opportunities to concentrate on what has most potential for building local understanding and for feeding into national 'policy learning'. The annual reporting cycle suits managerialist requirements, but it is unlikely to fit the emerging interplay of enquiry, development and decision making at local level.

For example, soon after the introduction of the national evaluation programme, all local centres were invited to bid for additional evaluation funding for a focused investigation to assess impact and cost-effectiveness of the work done so far. These intensive projects started in late October 1999 and the reports were completed by early December 1999, for profiling at a national event involving ministers, Voluntary Service Directors and Chief Officers. The underlying purpose of what became known as the 'Autumn Project' was to provide evidence of the impact on children, families, the local community and practitioners, before the next Treasury budget round. This short, focused evaluation study was also asked to explore cost-effectiveness, the contribution of the Early Years Excellence Programme to the National Childcare Strategy and means of addressing social exclusion.

Eight local centres contributed case studies to the overall report (DfEE, 2000). Whilst making the point that the Early Years Excellence Pilot Programme is subject to a comprehensive and robust evaluation, that report does already forecast potential cost savings of integrated approaches:

> What becomes apparent from the early evidence is that if EECs had not intervened to identify and meet needs, alternative and more expensive strategies would have been necessary, and more costly agencies and services would have been involved. (p. 43)

As with the previous example of 'child tracking', this 'national' requirement for early evidence of impact to meet government timescales did cut across local priorities. Locally, people were pre-occupied with getting started and generating enthusiasm. Whilst acknowledging that continuing government support might depend upon showing that things were working well, they did not feel ready to look for evidence of impact. For this reason, we designed a mini-project that enabled us to continue to concentrate on collecting the views of parents and families. We tried to use this as an opportunity to support local communication and concentrated on what was being achieved to support isolated, young mothers. A benefit was that one of these mothers, with three children and no qualifications or job experience, subsequently worked with us on an evaluation of how to involve 'difficult to reach' parents.

Local evaluation is modestly funded and evaluation time is limited. Comprehensive coverage of national indicators may have to be achieved at the expense of engaging stakeholders in continuing dialogue and acting on locally established priorities. The proposed timescale is clearly intended to inform the development of the national evaluation programme even though reservations are expressed. For example, the proposal does acknowledge tensions between, on the one hand, providing something quickly which may be *'superficial and of likely lower*

reliability and validity' (p. 98) and, on the other hand, providing weightier evidence that takes longer to get and consequently may become available too late to inform development of the whole programme, given government priorities and timescales.

To address this tension a time map is offered showing how impact and development priorities are sequenced in three phases: 1 year, 3 years and 5 years. It is heartening to see that a longer-term perspective is being envisaged, but as Fullan (1999) has warned, longer-term initiatives have so far

> ... not been politically attractive. Policy making is a world of adoption of the latest would be solutions ... the timeline to the next election is always shorter than the timeline for capacity building. (p. 69)

Approaches to Reporting

The national evaluation strategy emphasizes 'the regular production of accessible findings'. Annual and interim reports are expected to address established indicators and to build up a picture of a centre's functioning, effectiveness and impact over time. The first official local annual report is expected to offer early evidence on contextual and process indicators and some baseline data against which future impact can be mapped.

So far, the specifications on reporting are helpfully paradoxical. On the one hand they emphasize clear statements on functioning, effectiveness and impact of local centres, and on the other hand they invite a range of data sources to be used which may include narrative accounts of participants. We intended, originally, to go beyond merely adding local colour to the national picture, or simply offering illustrative examples of how objectives are met. We wanted to explore alternative ways of representing programme quality. We had intended that our approach would become open and pluralistic rather than presented in a closed, authoritative single voice. In Sumara and Luce-Kapler's (1993) terms, we aspired to producing 'writerly' rather than 'readerly' texts: texts that invite further discussion and enquiry rather than imply that nothing more needs to be said. As Greene (1999) warns:

> while no single representation is complete, some – like many performance indicators – are less complete than others. They miss, notably, the emotional and moral ethical strands of human experience, its complexity and contextuality, the layered meanings of interpretation, compelling connections to lived experience. (p. 169)

The form of the presentation was further limited, however, by a template for reporting which arrived mid June 2000, for submission at the end of July 2000. This tied down the form of presentation. All centre managers were asked to fill in boxes relating to all core indicators and those optional indicators which had been chosen locally. Each box contained a header asking for details of evidence, how it was collected and how it was validated.

The use of the template has highlighted the inexperience of centre staff in preparing evaluation reports. Self-evaluation was being given prominence and

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the report had to make clear who had been responsible for various aspects of the local evaluation. From the outset we had aimed to help build local capacity for self-evaluation and to develop locally based, relevant indicators. The template and tight deadline, however, led to rushed work to meet bureaucratic require-ments. National evaluators were communicating directly with centre managers and it seemed that local evaluators were moving to the fringes of the project. As inexperienced centre staff struggled to make meaning from their evaluation work, and as experienced local evaluators were frustrated that their work was becom-ing fragmented and marginal, it was not surprising that they shared puzzled anxieties and disillusionment.

The emphasis on indicators is shaping the project. As Helsby and Saunders (1993) predict, staff are beginning to see core indicators as professional reference points and to give them priority whether they see them as justifiable or not. National evaluation is seen as the completing of boxes, with a lot of repetition and little or no weight given to the over-riding importance of some local issues. The framework imposed by national evaluation appears to be leading to descrip-tions of local activities, and so concentrating on the 'what', rather than the 'how' and 'why'. This is tending to obscure authorship and reduce local evaluators' responsibilities to technical matters. As Greene (1999) reminds us, it is as though we were investing none of our own ideas and principles into our work.

Conclusion

More case studies are needed to build understanding cumulatively of how local and national evaluations are working in different fields of New Labour's evi-dence-based policy making. In this article, we have traced our changing concerns in the face of increasing control from a national evaluation programme, and out-lined how we have found ourselves in the midst of an interplay between national priorities and local conditions. As local evaluators we remain committed to inte-gration of enquiry and development and to making evaluation meaningful and educative for all participants. As the project has progressed, however, different contingencies, motives and priorities have created tensions between performance management and participatory evaluation. We now have reservations about how far the latter can be sustained locally, given limited resources and pressure for evidence of rapid impact against prescribed indicators. Strains are being felt, par-ticularly in relation to evaluators' roles, timescales and approaches to reporting.

The role of local evaluator can be either critically important or extremely limited. At its most limited and instrumental, local evaluators could act merely as technical aides. Depending upon how channels of communication are developed, this could involve either passing on required information to national evaluators, 'validating' the monitoring of local project managers, or helping local managers prepare reports for national evaluators within the constrictions of an imposed tem-plate. By the first round of the annual reporting cycle our role had moved closer to the latter, even though our early work was beginning to generate educative and participatory evaluation. The key to a worthwhile role for local evaluators is in their contribution to learning. Current emphasis upon a pre-specified framework

of indicators tends to be concentrating effort into finding the 'looked for', or confirming the 'asked for', at the expense of new understanding.

At the outset we had agreed that the duration and timing of each phase of the evaluation would be determined by the local steering group to suit local development. As national timescales were imposed, however, emphasis shifted to addressing national reporting requirements at the expense of local capacity building.

Our aspiration to find novel and appropriate forms of representation to stimulate local learning has been overshadowed by a need to divide what is already known into snippets that will fit the text boxes for each indicator in a reporting template. We have, nevertheless, experimented with representation locally, including photographic exhibitions for parents, but the essence of this work is lost in the national reporting structure. Important themes, such as parental confidence and motivation, are in danger of being lost in the recesses of the reporting process. As Eisner (1998) argues, the features of the work itself should guide the criteria applied to judge it.

Fullan (1999) has recently identified three problems of transferring good ideas so that local reforms become widespread and 'go to scale'. First, products of other people's reforms hide subtleties of practice, and subsequent attempts to spread them are compounded by a search for short cuts. Second, successful reforms are largely a function of the conditions in which they flourished rather than the ideas themselves, and the wrong things are being replicated. Third, 'reform on a large scale depends on the development of local capacity to manage innovations simultaneously' (p. 65) rather than on a discrete project. How, then, can local evaluators contribute to national evidence-based policy making, given the need for transparency and knowledge of what is being achieved in diverse local settings?

At best, local evaluators will help national evaluators by making palpable what is hidden in the fine grain of conditions that lead to quality within the history, culture and context of local centres. At a national level, local evaluators should be able to influence decisions about what value should be placed on what findings. Locally, they will support genuine, participatory enquiry. They will turn national indicators into well-grounded questions, and gradually help to transform frames of reference at a local level.

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Evaluating the Early Excellence initiative: the relationship between evaluation, performance management and practitioner participation.
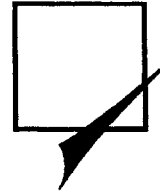
Evaluating the Early Excellence Initiative

The Relationship between Evaluation, Performance Management and Practitioner Participation

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This article focuses on an evaluation of the pilot implementation of the UK
'Early Excellence' programme, designed to improve Early Years services and
achieve national impact. As with other 'New Labour' programmes, the
evaluation approach was based on addressing the relationship between
'context, process and outcome'; to facilitate this, nationally defined
indicators were adopted through collaboration between a national
evaluation team, local evaluators and local practitioners. This approach left
considerable scope for interpretation and participation by local evaluators
and practitioners, as they engaged in data collection and analysis. However,
two major shifts later undermined the original scope: first, a shift from
evaluation to performance management, and second, a shift from central
practitioner participation to marginal practitioner involvement. In
conclusion, we note the parallels and contrasts between this experience and
others in UK public services, and propose some general learning points for
similar evaluation initiatives.

KEYWORDS: Early Years; evaluation; participation; performance
management; practitioner involvement

Introduction

This article focuses on an evaluation of the pilot implementation of a UK govern-
ment initiative. The 'Early Excellence' (EE) programme was funded by the UK

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Department for Education and Skills (DfES) from 1999. The initiative focused on improving the quality and scope of integrated Early Years services for families with young children. Typically, the range of integrated services offered within an EE site included extended day-care for under 5s, access to parent education and some other forms of training, crèche facilities for parents undertaking education and family support on an outreach basis. The initial pilot group of 11 sites (extended to 29 by 2002) included 8 which were based in single local authority or community-based pre-school childcare centres or nurseries, and 3 which were networks, linking a number of centres and neighbourhoods. Although not confined to areas of deprivation, 9 of the 11 original pilot sites were in fact in such areas. Findings discussed are based on data collected in 7 of these sites during the pilot phase.

Since 2002 the EE initiative has been rolled out to further sites, reaching 100 in number by 2004. In line with the UK government's broader policies on family support and education this has been followed by a subsequent policy initiative to set up 'Children's Centres' in every area. Children's Centres will serve children and families in disadvantaged communities and will provide integrated care and education for young children, health services, family support and a base for child-minders (Sure Start, 2003).

The Early Excellence evaluation framework and process were designed to encompass active collaboration between three key sets of participants: a national evaluation team, with expertise in Early Years research; an external local evaluator selected by each EE site, usually an academic; and EE-funded managers and practitioners. Within an initial three-year pilot programme this framework was designed to deliver annual findings to inform the long-term design and rollout of the initiative. The national research team defined the overall evaluation framework, on the basis of initial consultations with prac-titioners (Pascal et al., 1999). In the early stages, this left considerable scope for interpretation by local evaluators and practitioners, all of whom were required to play an active part in local data collection and analysis. Local evaluators were funded for 8–10 days' input each year. The national team was responsible for drawing together findings from all 29 pilot sites and presenting these in a series of three annual reports of which two have been published (Bertram and Pascal, 2001; Bertram et al., 2002).

In this article we focus on the interaction between national evaluators, local evaluators and practitioners, drawing on our experience of undertaking the role of local evaluator in 7 of the 29 pilot sites for the EE initiative. The authors all work within higher education, with expertise in undertaking evaluations as well as distinctive professional specialisms in sociology of health and welfare, special educational needs and disability, Early Years and continuing professional development. While we have backgrounds in different professional disciplines, we share a commitment to working within a participatory evaluation ethos, with the emphasis on working in partnership with respondents (Schwandt, 1996).

The first section of this article outlines the context and starting points for the EE evaluation process. Following this we briefly describe the seven sites from which our own findings are drawn, and summarize key aspects of our research and

evaluation methods. Discussion then focuses on two major shifts in emphasis, which we identified from our own findings: first, a shift from evaluation towards performance management in data collection and reporting requirements, and second, a shift from local practitioner participation to their more marginal involvement, in terms of the evaluation process. Finally, we propose some learning points for future evaluation processes and models in public service contexts.

The Context and Starting Points for the Early Excellence Evaluation

Successive New Labour national initiatives in health, education and allied areas in the UK have earmarked substantial resources for evaluation. An explicit focus on theorizing the relationship between 'context, mechanism and outcome' has been a common theme across this range of evaluation frameworks (Judge, 2000; Pawson and Tilley, 1997). However, in practice the models, methods and respective roles of evaluators and practitioners have been diverse. With some initiatives, a national research team has retained close control over all data collection and analysis, and has, for instance, sampled a selection of programme sites; with others, all sites have provided data and/or local findings, working to a common framework devised by a national team. Coinciding with this central government emphasis on evaluation has been an increasing push for practitioners not only to be research-aware in their practice, but also to be active partners in research and evaluation processes themselves (Davies et al., 2000).

The published national evaluation model for Early Excellence (Pascal et al., 1999) reflected the emphasis on self-review and evaluation developed by the National Union of Teachers and others for schools in the UK. This invited schools to 'speak for themselves', suggesting a move away from the audit culture which had prevailed in educational establishments and other parts of the public sector (Power, 1997), and also from the checklist mentality associated with government inspections. Early guidelines and documentation for the EE evaluation demonstrated a similar desire for something more than a process of external scrutiny or simplistic measurement. The national evaluation framework was outlined in a document, known colloquially as the 'blue book' (Pascal et al., 1999). This outlined a model of self-evaluation by EE sites, to be supported and validated by an external evaluator chosen by each setting, and adhering to explicit principles (Pascal et al., 1999: 19). Evaluation should:

- be ethically conducted in an open and honest manner, with the consent of all the participants;
- be collaborative and inclusive;
- be empowering, developmental and illuminative for all participants;
- have utility for all participants.

In the first year of the EE evaluation each site was required to collect data concerning 11 'core' indicators and up to 11 additional indicators. These indicators addressed specific aspects of context, process and outcome in each site. The 'blue book' evaluation guidance illustrated a wide range of acceptable data

collection methods, with an emphasis on qualitative approaches such as inter-
views, observation and narrative accounts. While the 'blue book' principles and
indicators were presented as a non-negotiable framework for the evaluation
process, there were neither constraints nor guidelines concerning sampling
frames or other specific aspects of data collection. In year one, it was left to local
evaluators and practitioners to negotiate specific data collection plans. Responsi-
bility for synthesizing submissions from local sites lay with the national evalu-
ation team. The evaluation framework appeared, therefore, to offer a starting
point for dialogue between national evaluators, local evaluators and prac-
titioners. The emphasis was on facilitation rather than prescription; implicitly if
not explicitly, this left considerable scope both for critical, reflective evaluation
and for practitioners' 'authentic participation' rather than 'mere involvement', as
outlined by McTaggart (1997):

> Authentic participation in research means sharing in the way research is conceptu-
> alised, practised and brought to bear on the life-world. It means ownership, that is
> responsible agency in the production of knowledge and improvement in practice.

While 'mere involvement implies none of this and creates the risk of cooption
and exploitation in the realisation of the plans of others' (McTaggart, 1997: 28).
In practice, however, this initial scope for critical reflection, partnership and prac-
titioner participation proved difficult to sustain over the three-year pilot period.
Some of these difficulties are explored later in this article. First, we outline the
nature of the seven centres where the authors were involved in evaluations,
followed by an overview of the chosen methodological approaches.

The Sites

The findings which underpin our discussion are drawn from four EE centres and
three EE networks located in the north-west, north-east and Yorkshire regions
of the UK. The seven centres and networks could be described as operating
within conceptualizations of integration as offered by Bradley (1982). He
suggests three levels of integration in early childhood services. The first level he
terms as 'coalition', where there is a broad cooperative approach between
services and pooling of resources. The second level is described as 'federation',
where the services work together, accepting each other's goals and developing
their provision in unison with each other. The third level Bradley terms as 'unifi-
cation', where all the systems work under one holistic, embracing system and
there is no division between the constituent parts. In years two and three, EE
sites were asked to indicate their level of integration with reference to these defi-
nitions and the key features of the seven pilot sites referred to in this article are
summarised in Table 1.

Local Evaluation: Perspectives and Methods

In theoretical terms, our approach to evaluation acknowledged key distinctions
between evaluation for accountability, evaluation for development and evaluation

Table 1. Description of the Seven Sites

Name and Location	Organizational base	History of integrated services	Stage of integration (EE) definition
Centre A: Urban setting: city in NW England, areas with above-average levels of deprivation	Nursery school	Established provision of services including family support, adult education and health support	Model of integration best described as co-ordinated or a 'federation' with separate but complementary services with common aims and purposes and shared philosophy
Centre B: Urban setting: city in NW England, areas with above-average levels of deprivation	EY centre housed in a former nursery school	Established provision of services including family support, adult education and health support	Model of integration best described as 'coordinated' ('federation'), with elements of 'unification' and 'coalition'
Centre C: Urban setting: city in NW England, areas with above-average levels of deprivation	Purpose-built EY centre, including links with local University as well as local communities	Established provision of services including family support, adult education and health support	As A and B above
Centre D: Urban setting in NE England; areas with above-average levels of deprivation	Primary school with nursery class	Some inter-agency links but no major history of integrated provision	Model of integration best described as 'coalition', with some elements of 'federation' developing
Network E: Rural setting in NE England; areas with above-average levels of deprivation	Network based on diverse range of Early Years settings	No history of integrated provision	Model of integration best described as 'coalition'
Network F: Urban setting in NE England; area of post-industrial, above-average deprivation	Network based on two primary schools	Some inter-agency links but no major history of integrated provision	Model of integration best described as 'coalition', with some elements of 'federation' developing
Network G: Urban setting: 3 neighbourhoods in a city in Yorkshire, England; two with above-average levels of deprivation	Network based on two integrated Young Children's Centres (YCCs) and one nursery school	Well-established local policy to integrate 'care' and 'education' resources in Early Years. YCCs provide childcare, adult education and family support	Model best described as 'coalition', with some elements of 'federation' developing

for knowledge-building (Chelimsky and Shadish, 1997). Local evaluation, while acknowledging the need to put a marker against national themes and overarching indicators (putting the emphasis on accountability), was also seen as engaging with practitioners in developing meaningful indicators and learning processes within their own sites (giving a developmental emphasis).

Given the variations in the geography, history and organizational structure of EE sites we regarded it as important to catch the flavour of 'what works' and 'what makes sense' in relation to the particular circumstances pertaining to each setting. With this in mind, we adopted the following common principles to underpin a participatory approach to evaluation with practitioners in local sites:

- promoting and supporting self-evaluation among EE staff, through the adoption of a 'critical friend' role and the joint discussion of emerging findings;
- facilitating communication among EE managers and practitioners through 'enabling conversations' about overall programme quality and direction;
- reflecting at intervals on appropriate evaluation indicators and criteria, in discussion with practitioners and managers;
- providing practical opportunities for EE practitioners to develop skills and experience in data collection and analysis (e.g. interviews, observation, diary-keeping);
- maintaining contact with the national evaluation team through occasional regional meetings and national conferences, as well as through the submission of annual written reports.

Like many other EE local evaluators, the authors (in negotiation with practitioners and managers) adopted an ethnographic approach (Hammersley, 1999; Massey, 1998). An ethnographic approach allows for a degree of flexibility in methodological tools and procedures, seen as a necessary prerequisite when the aim is to understand how participants both interpret and practically realize the underpinning policies of new initiatives in diverse sites. Ethnography, besides offering specific forms of analysis, aims to be holistic. What this meant, particularly during the early phases of the EE evaluation, was that the views, opinions, thoughts, hopes and desires of the stakeholders – including young children and their families as well as EE practitioners and managers – could both be voiced and heard.

Using an ethnographic approach sanctioned the joining together of the dual perspectives of 'insider' and 'outsider'. As the 'insiders', EE practitioners were able to access data within the remit of their everyday practices. Local evaluators, using their 'outsider' perspective, could encourage staff to 'recognise that even the most common and accepted practices might be questioned or appear questionable from that outsider perspective' (Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford, 2001: 197). On the basis of training and support negotiated with and provided by each local evaluator, qualitative and quantitative data collection was carried out by both EE practitioners and evaluators with both service-users and staff. An outline of the methods adopted is offered in Table 2.

Table 2. Data Collection Methods

Data collection method	Collected by:
Interviews with parents	Evaluators; EE staff/practitioners; in the case of two of the seven centres, by parents
Interviews with Early Years staff/practitioners (from both EE Centres and from collaborating Early Years services)	Evaluators; EE staff/practitioners
Interviews with officers of the local authority	Evaluators; EE staff/practitioners
Diaries	Parents; EE staff/practitioners; evaluators
Observations and field notes	Evaluators; EE staff/practitioners; practitioners from collaborating Early Years services (one centre only)
Focus groups attended by EE and non-EE staff/practitioners	Evaluators
Case studies	Evaluators; EE staff/practitioners; EE parents (one centre only); staff from other collaborating Early Years services (one centre only)

Findings

As has been emphasized, the initial EE evaluation framework was an open-ended, process-oriented and contextualized model, focusing explicitly on examining the relationship between both *what* different EE sites were doing and *how* and *why* they were doing it. The evaluation agenda offered considerable potential for a critical investigation of practice at both local and national level. While context and practice varied across the EE sites, there were opportunities to identify general principles for practice development and knowledge-building in early years settings. These offered the prospect of understanding complexity and diversity without straitjacketing practice. Our findings from seven of the pilot sites, however, indicate that these opportunities were substantially eroded over the three-year pilot period, in ways which illustrate some general tensions and difficulties concerning evaluations of this kind. We illustrate the specific steps through which these developments took place – first, in terms of specific changes in the structure and format of the evaluation, and second, in terms of specific changes in the process, including the relationships between evaluators, practitioners and policy-makers. Then we move on to discuss the wider significance of these observations.

Changes in Structure and Format: Data Collection and Annual Reports

In summer 2000, each of the 29 local EE sites submitted the first of three annual evaluation reports. These were substantially based on qualitative data, in line with the original guidance and the methods summarized in Table 2. The national

evaluation team then synthesized and analysed these data and produced a report that was submitted to the DfES (Bertram and Pascal, 2001). Subsequent feedback from the DfES to the national evaluation team signalled a requirement for the inclusion of much more quantitative data on activity, to accompany qualitative data from user and practitioner case studies, interviews and observations. From year two onwards local sites were required to collect and submit activity data to a prescribed format, for example, numbers of adults and children attending particular activities were to be recorded in standardized forms, along with some basic demographic and cost data. While these changes were not a problem in principle, specific aspects of their implementation became a source of friction throughout years two and three in the following ways.

First, difficulties arose from the design of the new national database structure for reporting activity levels. The database required inputs on session frequency, duration and attendance patterns that mirrored the routines prevailing in many single-site nurseries or day-care centres. However, the majority of EE pilot sites involved multi-agency collaborations, with staff offering substantial outreach, family support work, adult training, inter-professional collaborations and quality improvement activities. These were impossible to represent credibly in the nationally devised database fields yet, ironically, it was these flexible and integrated forms of provision that had been highlighted from the start of the EE programme as desirable initiatives for all sites to prioritize. Feeling unable to report substantial areas of activity because they didn't 'fit the headings' caused practitioners to worry about how their cost-effectiveness would be judged by the DfES as the key funder. While annual reports still offered scope to provide narrative accounts of activities, this was not perceived as a counterweight to the standardized format of the database entries. A short extract from the annual report from one centre ('Network G') illustrates this point.

Indicator C8: Funding and Costing

Our Funding and Costing information is included in the separate tables attached. We would like to emphasise that this only reflects some aspects of EE-funded work: i.e. work based on direct support for, and collaboration with, families and early years groups and organisations in the three designated areas. These costings do not capture the broader quality improvement and service development work which EE-funded staff carry out in collaboration with colleagues and community groups, as part of the network's overall Early Years Partnership work; this is fundamental to our 'network' approach and our aims of disseminating good practice. Costing these aspects fully would require a different kind of format from the current one, with scope to include strategic planning, service development and staff development, in addition to the local service delivery which is captured in the current format. (Network G, Annual Evaluation Report: 2000–2001)

Second, sites where a range of voluntary work occurred in situ had additional concerns about the reliable representation of costs, substantially because of a new requirement to include 'imputable costs'. Imputable costs were defined by the national evaluation team as costs that would be incurred during the course of a year if volunteer time and other donated or negotiated resources had to be paid

for (University College Worcester, 2001–2: 16). This included items such as the use of premises free of charge, voluntary helper work and donated play equipment. The rationale was to help the DfES to gain a picture of the 'true' cost of provision. However, by being counted in as 'costs', with no obvious corresponding 'benefit' item, running volunteer-based projects simply appeared as an additional expense. This concerned EE managers and staff, especially those who were committed to local networks and other forms of community-based collaboration. In some cases this led staff to question the viability of their practice rather than questioning the viability of the evaluation methodology.

A third set of concerns arose in connection with the ways in which an element of standardization was brought into qualitative data collection and analysis. The initial, heavy reliance on practitioner involvement in data collection, with little time for prior training, resulted in great variation in the nature and scope of the qualitative analyses included in annual reports at the end of the first year. The initial report format required sites to describe respondent samples with no explicit overall guidelines. It was therefore difficult to see how discrete local reports would be assembled into a credible national analysis to meet DfES expectations. Findings from interviews, case-study examples and observations were clustered under the headings of the 'blue book' specified 11 core and 11 additional indicators (Pascal et al., 1999: 6). Both practitioners and local evaluators found writing up findings under the framework of 22 indicators genuinely difficult, tending to prompt a fragmented account of user and practitioner experience. For example, extracts from the same interview data from a parent, concerning a child's learning, might be included under several distinct indicators: the 'context' indicator for 'Communication with Families' (C1b), the 'process' indicator for 'Quality of Learning and Development (P1) and the 'outcome' indicator for 'Enhanced Disposition to Learn' (O1b). There was a logic to this, in terms of understanding links between context, process and outcome, as the indicator titles themselves show, but without a whole narrative account and context appearing anywhere, coherence and overall significance could easily be lost. It is certainly the case that the pilot sites adopted differing approaches to working with the framework of indicators. This presented a major challenge for the national evaluation team in drawing findings together at the end of the first full year of the pilot programme.

After the first report, in an effort to address some of these issues, the format for reporting was streamlined. First, although 'context, process and outcome' indicators were still to be addressed, findings were now to be clustered under broader headings. These headings included 'evidence of benefits; evidence of performance; achievements and challenges'. This tended to result in a shift from critical reflection, analysis and evaluation to what was described by one evaluator during a national meeting as 'victory narratives'. In addition, a short, prescribed format was prescribed for case studies that confined case-study accounts to addressing given aspects of involvement. For instance, a family 'case-study' was to describe 'family type', 'stress factors', 'take up of EE services' and 'benefits' (rather than 'outcomes'), leaving little room for critique and meaning-making. The development of understandings about why something might be happening appeared to be left to the margins. Here, in our view, an opportunity

for mutual learning was largely missed. The original evaluation model had considerable scope to examine and to theorize potential links between each site's socioeconomic and policy context, the processes involved in specific EE roles and service developments and observed outcomes for children, families and communities. Yet without any explicit decision being made, this type of analysis appeared to be sidestepped by the national evaluation framework after the end of the first year, particularly at the level of regular national reports and conferences where emerging themes and comparisons might have been debated.

At a local level, evaluators committed to participatory enquiry and evaluation for development and knowledge-building did persevere with attempts to analyse and theorize from practice. In Network G, for example, regular meetings with EE staff prompted a sustained dialogue over the effectiveness of EE-funded family support work. What would define successful intervention and over what timescale should this be measured? How might the relative value of helping one troubled parent manage her depression be compared with supporting another, with fewer immediate difficulties, to make the transition into employment? A 'good' outcome for one might be to maintain a fragile status quo, while for the other it would be to make a substantial change. From year two onwards, the nationally prescribed EE evaluation report format privileged the second type of individual 'outcome' (an identifiable 'benefit') rather than the first, which would result in a less tangible and therefore less measurable outcome. In both cases, a major theme (a long-term staffing crisis in Social Services) formed the significant backdrop to EE family support worker roles, and to increasing pressures on staff workloads and priorities. However, this key issue would remain largely invisible within the report headings used for submissions to the national evaluators and hence to the DfES.

As Greene (1999: 169) points out:

> ... while no single representation is complete, some ... are less complete than others. They miss, notably, the emotional and moral ethical strands of human experience, its complexity and contextuality, the layered meanings of interpretation, compelling connections to lived experience.

To summarize then, in terms of the structure and format of analyses and reports from local evaluators and practitioners to the national evaluation team (and then the DfES), years two and three of the evaluation saw a distinct shift, from a process evaluation based on participation and development towards an evaluation that gave weight to documented, measurable activity under a prescribed set of headings. At the inception of the EE pilot process there had been a major opportunity to engage practitioners and local evaluators in debate, in order to use their initial experience to refine and strengthen the original evaluation framework at national level, and to enhance the infrastructure (including practitioner skills in evaluation) at local level. Instead, however, changed requirements were presented to sites in year two, without meaningful dialogue. These changes reflected a progressive narrowing of the evaluation framework. Over time, the types of data and the reporting formats required marked a clear move to an evaluation for accountability rather than an evaluation that would incorporate

development and knowledge-building. Without debate concerning why certain data had to be collected and how they might be used, the evaluation indicators began to operate as de facto performance management targets, rather than focal points for reflection and practice development. This illustrates the risks described by Helsby and Saunders (1993) that national performance indicators can lead to deprofessionalization, distortion of local priorities for evaluation, and the loss of opportunities to understand causal relationships. We now explore in more depth some aspects of these changes within the processes of collaboration between local evaluators, practitioners and national evaluators.

Changes in the Evaluation Process and in Evaluator–Practitioner Relationships

At the outset, most EE managers and practitioners had limited experience and hence understanding of evaluation, bracketing it with government school inspections and audit. They saw the work of the evaluation as counting and checking up, as unwelcome and as more work – that is, as an externally imposed accountability structure. In addition, most EE sites lacked databases, trained staff or other forms of infrastructure to support the collection of evaluation data. In most cases, the original bids for EE funding had prioritized front-line service delivery rather than administrative or management resources, reflecting a long-established ethos in Early Years services. In the early stages of the EE evaluation, while some managers were keen to take control of the evaluation process, most wanted to hand over the initiative to their local evaluator as far as possible (Sites D, F and G). Some managers felt that their staff were ill-equipped in terms of professional development to take on evaluation demands and that they needed protection from 'yet another initiative' and 'yet more paper-work' (field note, Network F). For others, the demands of devolving and decentralizing power in newly configured services took precedence, leaving evaluation to take a back seat. Working on a collaborative and inclusive basis requires time and careful consideration to allow an appropriate culture to develop. Despite this we found that, where practitioners were supported by local evaluators, confidence in participating in evaluation activities and in using evaluation more appropriately to accommodate local needs did increase over the three pilot years: 'This year we have had the confidence to move away from the indicators in the knowledge that what we do will encompass them' (Annual Report 2001, Network F).

The initial role of the local evaluator therefore involved facilitating practitioners' discussion of their reservations about evaluation, initiating a dialogue with them about its general aims and scope, and then considering with them how to approach the national indicators. The initial emphasis on facilitative enquiry within the national evaluation framework offered considerable potential for the participatory research approaches favoured by evaluators who emphasized the importance of promoting local 'participatory citizenship'. Like Greene (1999), however, evaluators recognized that: 'Determining (these) standards and determining which stakeholders participate in decisions about program standards constitute the challenging social-political dimensions of our craft' (Greene, 1999: 163).

In years two and three of the evaluation, some developments at local level did provide a basis for increasing practitioner participation. For example, even the problematic process of collecting quantitative data under standardized headings as outlined earlier contributed to increased critical awareness among practitioners. Evaluators and practitioners found themselves debating issues of reliability and validity as they identified in detail why it was difficult or impossible to implement some of the national categories for gathering activity data across diverse settings and service configurations. For some practitioners, this resulted in the formulation of their own local adaptations and the application of this learning to aspects of Early Years work beyond the EE programme. This learning rarely surfaced explicitly in national reports, but in EE sites where critical reflection was becoming more accepted as a positive developmental attribute it did become embedded in local practices.

In the pilot sites referred to in this article, local evaluators ran workshops in research/evaluation skills, including the use of techniques such as interviews or observation. Following their engagement in evaluation, practitioners reported that interviewing parents in a 'research' mode rather than a service delivery mode contributed to an unanticipated improvement in mutual trust and understanding. For example, a long evaluation interview undertaken by one EE practitioner in Network G brought to light domestic violence issues in a family which had never been raised before. This was welcomed by the practitioner in question, although it also underlines the ways in which involving practitioners in research activities raises potentially complex ethical issues.

An example from another site (Network F) also illustrates how practitioner participation evolved through data gathering and reflection on the point, purpose and potential of evaluation. Network F's local evaluator began by discussing the development of case studies with representatives from a range of disciplines who attended the EE steering group meetings. She felt there was a need to 'sell' the collection of case study data as both an investigation of practice and an investment in practice development. This, she hoped, would lead to practical gains both for the staff involved and for the families with whom they worked, helping to bridge the gap between involvement and authentic participation in evaluation and to give evaluation local credibility through a clear path to practical application.

A series of multi-disciplinary, multi-agency meetings was timetabled. The content of these meetings was initially 'research methodology and its practical application' but it then moved on to discussions of case-study findings and practical applications. The local evaluator's role was to facilitate the meetings and to pull together overarching themes emanating from the case studies.

The first meeting, supported as it was by local managers, was well attended by 'bodies'; however, the local evaluator felt that 'minds' were perhaps more reluctant participants. As one centre co-ordinator noted, evaluation methodology was still 'somebody else's work', not theirs! Once the practitioners started the practical work of interviewing families, observing and making field notes, however, the tenor of the meetings changed from reluctant attendance to active and enthusiastic participation. Practitioners were eager to tell of their experiences,

their learning and of what that might mean for future work, both for themselves and for other local agencies. Practitioners from different disciplines began redefining multi-agency involvements across the 'case-study' table, both in terms of their understandings of each other's models of practice and the nature and parameters of that practice. What is more, hearing about their own practice from another's perspective gave practitioners new insight into their own work, prompting one to comment for example: 'This is not just evaluation, it is professional development. I've been learning about my job doing this' (Transcript of meeting, Network F). Evaluation had, in her view, stopped being an externally imposed accountability exercise that bore little relevance to day-to-day practice and had taken on a tangible, purposeful reality.

A practitioner's contribution to the end of year report submitted to the national evaluators noted that:

> The case studies are a real strength of the evaluation. On their own they can shed light on the particular needs of families, enhance relationships between practitioners and families but can also remain as stories. When brought together to develop themes and learning opportunities across practitioners we can see new ways of thinking about old situations that can lead to developments of practice along new lines. (Annual Report, Network F, 2000–1)

The success of any learning enterprise must be based on how we use that learning in the future. The case-study approach resulted in a significant shift in certain working links and practices based on an in-depth look at what was really happening in practice. Staff from Network F stated that working on case studies 'helped them to understand the perspective of families more clearly, to understand the perspectives of other practitioners and to begin to develop inter-agency practice based on new understandings' (Annual Report, Network F, 2000–1). Practitioners wanted to 'make sense of what is going on' and to attach new meanings and values to their work, in the sense suggested by Rowland (1988: 63): 'Learning is not only the result of what we do, but also how we give meaning to what we have done.'

Case studies came to be seen as a strong tool for linking evaluation and practice development, one of the key principles of evaluation as espoused by the authors. While change had occurred however, bigger changes and development might have been possible were time given for all, including managers, to engage in more reflective research leading to what Somekh (2002: 92) termed 'the construction of knowledge with its enactment in practice'.

During years two and three the high profile given to quantitative data collection and the changed reporting structures had the overall effect of devaluing the notion of the worth of the case studies. Being unable to represent the learning that came from the case-study process reinforced the perception of counting and measuring activity levels as the 'real' work of the evaluation. Tensions between performance management and evaluation were sometimes felt as tensions between the local evaluators' emphasis on evaluation for development, and the perceptions of external surveillance and accountability (from the DfES, the Minister, the government) which bore down directly both on local practitioners and on the national evaluation team.

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To summarize, joint work between local evaluators and practitioners did make progress towards 'evaluation for development' and, more unevenly, towards 'evaluation for knowledge-building'. Despite the performance management pressures outlined above, the unwanted image of local evaluator as 'inspector' began to be eroded where practitioners experienced the direct relevance of collaborative evaluation to practice. It is debatable, however, whether the dichotomy between 'us' (local evaluator) and 'them' (EE site staff) was ever replaced with a genuine sense of 'we' as is posited within participatory evaluation.

Discussion

Managing such a large, diverse team of local evaluators was necessarily a challenge for the National Evaluation Team. This was due in part to the diversity of the EE sites and the different models of integration they espoused. It was, however, also due to changes in the focus of the evaluation at national level, in relation to its original principles, which were never debated or agreed explicitly with the local evaluators and practitioners who collected most of the evaluation data. We would suggest, therefore, that missed opportunities in the EE evaluation process highlight a number of questions and learning points for the evaluation of similar multifaceted projects such as the new Children's Centre Initiative which will further develop integrated services in UK Early Years settings in the coming years.

First, it is clear that the relationship between policy, policy-makers and the evaluation was under-rehearsed in the Early Excellence context. This left few defences against pressures for performance management targets to gain prominence at the expense of more subtle and long-term considerations. Clearly articulating a range of influences on evaluation would seem to be a vital and necessary element affecting the development of any evaluation research. We need to make plain the political and practical relationships between evaluators and policy-makers, including how and when policy-makers intend to use 'findings' from the evaluation process. The National Audit Office (NAO) recently reported that much of the £1.4 billion of research commissioned by the government is wasted because it never leads to a change in policy (Batey, 2003). For example, Ho, when evaluating urban regeneration programmes in Britain, found 'little evidence to show that new regeneration initiatives have been formulated based on lessons learned from previous evaluation studies' (Ho, 1999: 422).

Currently, there appears to be some inconsistency, both locally and nationally, in terms of links between the commissioning of evaluation and sustainable pathways to embed learning from evaluations in future policy and practice. Learning in Early Years contexts needs to include learning about planning for integrated sites and their implementation, as well as learning about the whole range of possibilities afforded by programme evaluation itself. Unless these issues are addressed, an approach to evaluation based on the drive to achieve what is termed 'cost-effectiveness' will continue to mask and limit the learning opportunities that could be provided by evaluation. In the long term evaluation will not be addressing the quality and effectiveness of programmes and the loss

of this critical edge could ultimately lead to unnecessary or misdirected spending.

Second, there was a tension over the purpose of the evaluation, and over who would act on its findings. Clarity is needed not only about what is to be done in an evaluation but also about what an evaluation might be looking for. Is the purpose of evaluation to find out 'what is', 'what could be' or does it lie somewhere between the two? If so, how is balance between the two maintained? In terms of purpose the debate appears to lie in the interplay between evaluation for accountability, evaluation for project development and evaluation for overall knowledge-building. We have suggested that a lack of exploration into the understanding of the purposes of evaluation across the evaluator–practitioner grouping seriously compromised the possibilities of the EE evaluation and supported a move towards audit and performance management rather than evaluation for development and learning. In the absence of strong advocacy from local and national figures the original model of participative inquiry easily became diluted in the exigencies of daily practice.

The purpose of an evaluation is inextricably linked to the question 'Who is this evaluation for?' Making both purpose and perspective explicit supports clarity of role and subsequent behaviour and action. Local evaluators were caught between the increasing pressure to provide performance management data for the national evaluators and facilitating developmental, purposeful evaluation for the setting. The initial, facilitative emphasis of the evaluation framework was quickly eclipsed by the blurring of the boundary between evaluation and performance management. Developments between years one and two of the evaluation suggested that the impact of external influences such as national policy-makers, including the Treasury, was largely responsible for such a shift. This is not particularly surprising – but does underline the importance of key protagonists' awareness that they need to clarify the current relationship between policy and practice and the expected role of an evaluation: 'researchers need to recognise that policy is shaped by many, often conflicting, interests and pressures' (BERA Colloquium, 2002: 9).

One way in which this could be avoided in future evaluation processes would be to safeguard and stimulate debate between national evaluators, local evaluators and practitioners, rather than marginalizing it. Policy-makers also need to consider how they use these opportunities for learning. One of the key conclusions of the NAO (2003) investigation into how research is used in policy-making was that: 'the early involvement of potential users of the research will increase the likelihood that research results will be utilised' (NAO, 2003: 7)

Ironically, in the case of the Early Excellence evaluation, while a lot was expected of practitioners in terms of learning how to collect data, far too little was invested in ensuring time for this. Alongside this, local evaluators were funded for only 8–10 days per year, which left very little time for the development of participatory research skills. Also, very little was expected of practitioners and of local evaluators in terms of critical debate about policy and practice. Once again the choice here is between rather marginal or passive 'involvement' and 'authentic participation'. Time for enquiry, questioning and

debate are prerequisites if a culture that supports research and evaluation at sustainable levels is to take root in Early Years settings.

Third, issues concerning the analysis and use of data, and how data can be understood and used by the various parties engaged in delivering and evaluating Early Years services, remained largely unexplored in the EE context. As argued by Van der Meer (1999: 390): 'In order to explain the impact of evaluation we need a better and more detailed understanding of the processes of the construction of meaning and behaviour within (and between) organisations.'

Interpretations of data can be influenced by context and history. Data from case studies illustrating how families had used services on offer could be particularly contentious. The same information could be used to demonstrate how well the national framework for EE rollout was progressing, how well the local EE centre/network was performing or how astute local families were in accessing available services. Each could claim 'victory' for themselves. To understand what an evaluation is saying to us in terms of impact, all parties need to collaborate and have the opportunity to enter into dialogue concerning which elements of evaluation are to be the focal points and at what stage in the lifecycle of that evaluation. Once data are collected there needs to be further collaborative endeavour to clarify what meanings are ascribed to the data and from whose perspective. This needs to be overtly embedded into the commissioning of evaluations, the practice of evaluating and how evaluations are reported.

Fourth, the timing of the evaluation will affect the subsequent usefulness of findings. Van der Meer (1999), citing the work of Mulder et al. (1991) and Rist (1994), suggests that there is clear evidence that the timing of reports in relation to the actual stage of a policy process is one of the key elements affecting its use. In the case of the EE centres and networks the pilot programme was running and being evaluated at the same time as the rollout programme. The scope and scale of the rollout programme, as well as the continued funding of existing centres/networks, were dependent on Treasury approval. This created major tensions for evaluators. In a situation where the lead national evaluators (and the majority of local evaluators) were committed to the development of integrated Early Years childcare and education, who would dare to critique a process (in a milieu where critique is often interpreted as criticism and a suggestion that the product is faulty) and risk cutting off the funding stream? Learning can be hijacked by the reality of political and financial feasibility.

Finally, the diversity of models and sites across the 29 EE pilot sites offered considerable scope for comparison and mutual learning: not only between the 'centre-based' and 'network-based' models, but also within each of these clusters. The initial evaluation framework certainly had potential to facilitate this, and to explore 'how' particular developments emerged as well as 'what' was being achieved. However, the shifts and tensions outlined narrowed this potential enormously during years two and three. Many sites, particularly new centres or networks without a history of audit trails to utilize, focused on meeting the known requirements of evaluation rather than having time to investigate the actual workings of their services in practice and for the future. In the hierarchy of the 'to do' list, tangible evidence is often gathered at the expense of the intangible.

If process indicators are important it has to be recognized that they can easily be overshadowed or even lost by an overemphasis on the auditing of areas such as child and family attendances, the pattern of community organizations visiting a site or the annual number of training courses delivered. An emphasis on audit at the expense of evaluation and reflection can result in a search for specific practices to be delivered in any location rather than a broad set of principles relating understanding to local sites under a national policy umbrella.

Conclusion

Underlying the establishment of Early Excellence centres and networks was the hope that they, together with other initiatives, would work towards nurturing, supporting and sustaining social structures including that of the family. As such, EEs were intended to contribute to 'Creating the bonds of civil society and community in ways which are compatible with the individualistic nature of modern economic, social and cultural life' (Blair, 1997: 2).

Such aspirations are, however, couched firmly within a production and output culture for, as Blair continues: 'We will find out what works, and we will support the successes and stop the failures. We will back anyone – from a multi-national company to a community association – if they can deliver the goods' (Blair, 1997: 2). Identifying 'what works' is part and parcel of an evaluation process. Similarly, performance management is a distinct and allied area, which can accompany evaluation and reflection rather than displacing them. However, our own findings illustrate the pressures to blur these boundaries, allowing evaluation to be seen as a technocratic exercise aimed at 'delivering the goods'. In the EE context, this led to pressures on all those involved in the reporting process to 'prove' the worth of the initiative rather than to examine its development. As Strathern notes: '*proof* of performance and productivity requires outputs that can be measurable and thus made visible' (Strathern, 1997: 318; our emphasis). Strathern continues:

> What gets subverted in such a process is the integral role that time with no visible output plays . . . time must be set aside for all the wasteful and dead-end activities that precede the genuine findings. Yet there is almost no language within the audit culture in which to talk about productive non-productivity. (Strathern, 1997: 318)

In conclusion, our argument is that the basis for authentic evaluation should include, at its inception, the following: a clear exposition of the nature, parameters and expectations of evaluation, which do not change over time; an expectation that learning and development for all participants (funders, national and local evaluators, practitioners and users) will need to be nurtured and supported; planned time to allow reflection, absorption and reformulation of ideas and understandings; reporting structures that reflect the evaluation ethos, within timescales that allow learning to be incorporated into the fabric of a programme's development. This framework lays a basis for transferable learning and scope to explore not only 'what is' and 'what works' but 'why'.

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Voices from Segregated Schooling: Towards an Inclusive Education System.

Voices from Segregated Schooling: towards an inclusive education system

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ABSTRACT *Romantown LEA, like other authorities in England and Wales, is adopting a policy of 'inclusion' in providing education for young disabled people. The reorganisation has involved the closure of Adamston, an all-age school for pupils with physical disabilities. This article addresses the meaning of 'inclusion' from the viewpoint of disabled people who have experienced segregated education. We draw first on the literature to offer an analysis of the documented views of survivors of special schools. Secondly, we explore the views and experiences of Adamston pupils prior to the closure of the school. In presenting what clearly represents a wide range of experiences we seek to take the debate beyond the sterile analysis of 'pros and cons' of special schools. We argue that voices from experiences of segregation are central in constructing 'inclusion' and essential in any process of change towards an education system which is truly inclusive.*

Introduction

A local education authority (LEA), we shall call Romantown, has begun reorganising its special educational needs provision under a policy flag of 'inclusion'. The changing policy and associated changes in provision and practice are, at least in general terms, being undertaken in numerous Local Authorities around Britain. One aspect of Romantown's reorganisation involved the closure of an all age school, we shall call Adamston, for pupils with physical disabilities, a school which first opened in the 1920s. The pupils from this school have been placed (in September 1999) in a range of provision, particularly in mainstream schools with 'additionally resourced centres' and newly-opened special schools for pupils with learning difficulties. (The reorganised system did not include a school for pupils with physical disabilities.) We explored the pupils' views about their education, and the changes they were experiencing, in a project in which a photograph album of pupils' memories of Adamston was created.

In this paper we have three related aims:

(1) to present an analysis of the judgements disabled people bring to bear on their education, from experiences of segregated schooling, through a review of the literature;

(2) to explore the views and experiences of Adamston pupils prior to the closure of their school under the policy of inclusion;

(3) to examine the contribution of disabled adults and pupils views in moves towards inclusion. In attempting to realise our aims, our overall argument became that moves towards inclusion must be founded on the participative involvement of disabled people (adults and pupils) in changing education.

Whilst the judgements, views and experiences of both the adults and pupils were different and diverse, gathered from stories about residential and non-residential schooling situated in socially, historically and geographically disparate communities, it became clear that there were common themes that linked their stories. They were predominantly about being what James & Prout (1990, p. 6) term 'passive subjects of structural determinations' and not being actively involved in the construction of their own lives. The themes that linked them together are around perspectives of both feeling and being excluded from decision making processes that fundamentally affected their lives, and the imperative for disabled people to participate in debates about their experiences and processes of change which shape and transform their experiences.

In attempting to realise our aims, our overall argument is that moves towards inclusion must be founded on the participative involvement of disabled people (adults and pupils) in changing education.

Inside Stories: Histories of Segregated Schooling

In general terms, much of the research on disability, including disabled children, has ignored the views and experiences of disabled people themselves. Non-disabled people have researched disability and given their perspectives. Histories of segregated schooling are, for the most part, the official histories of non-disabled people and professionals, documenting such things as changing numbers, and types of schools and official rationales for changing policies. Furthermore, research into disability has focused primarily on medical and psychological issues, rather than on the disabling environment. These critiques have led to a growing literature on the problematic nature of disability research (Barnes & Mercer, 1997). In relation to research with disabled children, Robinson & Stalker state:

> While there is a well established body of knowledge about the way parents experience life with a disabled child, children's own accounts of their lives are largely missing, their voices have not been heard. (1998, p. 7.)

Shakespeare and Watson (1998) makes the point that children can have profound experiences of life, including disability, and yet they have not been consulted or taken seriously by academic or professional 'experts'. A recent exception is the 'Life

of a Disabled Child' project which has focused on disabled children's perspectives and experiences as social actors within a disabling environment (Priestley, 1999).

The literature on disabled people's experiences of segregated education is not extensive and comes mainly from disabled adults reflecting on their childhood experiences. In reviewing what disabled adults and children say about their education it becomes apparent that their experiences are varied and their views are diverse. Themes do emerge, however, in terms of what is seen to be important about their education. These themes, of educational standards, personal and social liberation and education as an experience in itself, will be explored in the first part of this paper.

Educational Standards

Educational standards have consistently been important for disabled people. Segregated schools are judged by insiders in terms of what is taught, how it is taught and the effectiveness of the teaching they experience. The educational standards experienced by disabled people in segregated schools have generally been low (Barnes, 1991). Paul, a visually impaired man we interviewed, said:

> The schools were too isolated, they set their own very low standards. It has been shown many times with blind and partially sighed people from our generation, that they've left school and then gone on and done quite well by their own efforts. On the other hand they did give me a certain amount of independence and I was able to do things on the sporting side that I probably wouldn't have been able to do in an integrated setting. (French *et al.*, 1997, p. 30.)

Many special schools placed a huge emphasis on practical tasks like cleaning and gardening. Henry, a man with learning difficulties, recalled:

> We used to play games, learning to read and write, spelling and how to clean places up—how to wash windows, how to clean anything you can mention. (Potts & Fido, 1991, p. 68.)

In addition to low educational standards, physically impaired people frequently complain about the amount of time spent in various forms of therapy. Phil Friend, who features in Davies's book, states:

> ... looking back from the age of nine to sixteen, the primary concern of that school was to 'therup' me. It was nothing to do with education really. (Davies, 1992, p. 37.)

Similarly, deaf people complain that their education was eroded by an obsessive emphasis on the ability to lip read and to talk (Craddock, 1991). These views are supported by Alderson & Goodey who state:

> Too many therapists in a school can divert the school's main remit away from education so that learning is fitted around therapy and students risk being further disabled academically. (1998, p. 154.)

Poor educational standards in special schools, though common, were, however, never universal. Selective schools for visually impaired, hearing impaired and physically impaired children, who were judged to be academically able, have existed for many years, preparing their pupils for university or entry to some professions. Disabled people who have attended such schools sometimes express satisfaction with the education they have received.

Personal and Social Liberation

The experience of education also has meaning in the broader terms of how it impacts on the lifestyles and quality of life of disabled people. Disabled people may judge the education they receive in terms of empowerment-disempowerment and oppression-liberation. Some disabled people find that they receive a superior education and have a more favourable lifestyle than their non-disabled siblings and peers by virtue of being excluded. Martha, a Malaysian woman with a visual impairment we interviewed, was separated from a poor and neglectful family at the age of 5 and sent to a special residential school. She said:

> I got a better education than any of them (brothers and sisters) and much better health care too. We had regular inoculations and regular medical checks and dental checks. (Swain & French, 2000.)

Martha subsequently went to university and qualified as a teacher, which none of her siblings achieved.

Some of the people interviewed by Willmot & Saul (1998), about their experiences in 'open air' schools, give examples of their escape from poverty and abuse. This is illustrated in the following quotation by Jill Embury:

> I was there because of a weak chest; every cold turned to bronchitis and also I suffered very badly with my nerves because of emotional and physical abuse by my stepfather and mother ... Before I went to Cropwood I had absolutely no self-esteem because of my traumatic home life. But Miss Boothroyd took me under her wing and made me feel of some worth ... I was determined to get out of the inner city back streets and try to make something of myself. (in Willmot & Saul, 1998, p. 174.)

A recurrent theme in the accounts given by disabled adults is the confidence they gained by attending segregated schools. John O'Shaughnessy, a man interviewed by Willmot & Saul, said:

> I remember my very first day at Uffculme as a very shy 14-year-old lad who had spent half of his life at home, ill with asthma and wrapped in cotton wool ... I left Uffculme two years later an $11\frac{1}{2}$ stone, self-confident young man ready to face the working world. (1998, pp. 168–169.)

The positive social effects of being with similarly disabled people can even emerge within highly abusive institutions:

> Attending special school at the age of nine was, in many ways, a great relief.

> Despite the crocodile walks, the bells, the long separations from home and the physical punishment, it was an enormous joy to be with other partially sighted children and to be in an environment where limited sight was simply not an issue. I discovered that many other children shared my world and, despite the harshness of institutional life, I felt relaxed, made lots of friends, became more confident and thrived socially. For the first time in my life I was a standard product and it felt very good. (French, 1993, p. 71.)

Heumann writes of similar experiences:

> I remember the feeling of relief when I was able to talk to other disabled people, who confirmed that my experiences as a disabled person were all too real. (1992, pp. 192–193.)

Although some disabled people have found that the experience of special education gave them self-confidence, others have found the opposite to be the case (Leicester, 1999). Eve, a visually impaired woman, said:

> There was too much discipline. They were ever so strict. They used to run people down all the time and make you feel that you were useless. They used to make you feel that you were there as a punishment rather than to learn anything. They didn't understand children at all, never mind their sight. They used to expect you to do what they wanted and they used to get really cross if you couldn't see something, or you couldn't clean your shoes properly, or do anything they wanted you to do; what confidence I had they took it all away. (French, 1996, p. 33.)

Education as an Experience in Itself

A major theme throughout the literature documenting disabled people's experiences of segregated education is the quality of the experience in its own right. As for non-disabled people, one way of judging experiences is in terms, for instance, of enjoyment and happiness or boredom and unhappiness. John O'Shaughnessy, who went to an 'open air' school, said of his experiences, 'In later years my thoughts drift back to the happiest two years of my childhood' (Willmot & Saul, 1998, p. 169). However, regardless of impairment, accounts of physical, sexual, psychological and emotional abuse are commonly disclosed by disabled adults especially those who went to residential schools. Harriet, who attended a school for visually impaired girls in the 1950s and 1960s, recalled the physical abuse:

> We went to bed at five o'clock in the evening and we didn't get up until seven o'clock in the morning but we weren't allowed to get out of bed to go to the toilet. I was very unsettled because I'd gone to foster parents at the age of three and then to school at the age of five, and one night I wet the bed. The prefect on duty realised what had happened and she tried to cover up for me, she got me out of bed and put me in the bath, but one of the matrons came along. She picked me up out of the bath, just as I was

soaking wet, and gave me the hiding of my life ... I yelled and screamed, it terrified me. (French, 1996, p. 31.)

Emotional and psychological abuse was also rife in residential special schools and was often maliciously focused on the child's impairment. Evelyn King, who is physically impaired, recalled:

> I used to use a spoon and if I spilt anything, like tea, they used to get a cloth and make me wipe it up ... Sometimes they would say, 'If you do this again, you won't see your mothers and fathers again, I won't have this.' ... I hated some of them ... it used to make you upset, you know. (Humphries & Gordon, 1992, p. 90).

It should not be assumed, however, that all insider experiences of segregated schools are negative in terms of the quality of the experiences themselves. Some of the people interviewed by Willmot & Saul (1998), speaking about their experiences in 'open air' schools, suggested that even though the regimes of these schools were institutional and harsh, they regarded their time there as a highly positive experience, including in terms of the basic necessities of life such as food. This is illustrated in the following quotations by Jill Embury and Peter Holmes:

> I thought the food was great because we had porridge and always something fried, like sausage and bacon, I especially liked the deep fried bread ... (in Willmot & Saul, 1998, p. 174.)

> My first impression at the age of seven or eight years was its vastness.

> Previously all I had ever seen was factories, terraced houses and bomb-sites. To a child like myself it was magnificent. The countryside and woods were overwhelming and very beautiful and the air so sweet ... One of my happiest memories is the long walks ... we would walk through the woods and visit farms seeing animals and flowers and trees that most of us had only ever seen in books ... The food was very good. We also had indoor toilets and bathrooms, something we didn't have at home, and real toilet paper—not newspaper. (in Willmot & Saul, 1998, p. 257.)

A strong and recurrent theme in the accounts of disabled people who have attended residential schools is the distress at being separated from their families, particularly when very young. Chris, a young man we interviewed (French & Swain 1997), recalled being very unhappy and crying every Monday morning as he waited for the bus to take him back to school where he was a weekly boarder. He was much happier when transferred to a 'special' unit in a mainstream school. Similarly, Stella recalled that on one occasion she screamed and struggled so much that, not only did she miss the train, but her mother had to buy her some new clothes (French with Swain, 2000).

The literature on educational exclusion is full of harrowing stories of separation (Monery & Jones 1991). Adam a young visually impaired man we interviewed in

1994 (see French & Swain 1997) had negative feelings about being at a special residential school. He said:

> I'm a boarder here, and so is Chris, we share a room together and I hate the way we ... It's like 'you should be sent to bed early' or you should be doing something you don't want to do.

He could, however, find some advantages:

> 'You don't have to worry about fights with your parents. If I have a fight with them I can just put the phone down, hang up on them. And then my Mum rings me up ten minutes later and says she's sorry.

Many disabled adults have found that the experience of segregated education interfered with, or even ruined, their family relationships. Richard Wood, who is physically impaired, said:

> I think it destroyed my family life, absolutely, I don't know my family ... I never looked forward to going home in the school holidays ... I never felt I belonged there ... within two or three days I couldn't wait to get back to school because I really wanted to see my mates. (Rae, 1996, pp. 25–26.)

Detachment from the entire home community is also a common experience of disabled people both during school holidays and when they leave school. Lorraine Gradwell, a physically impaired woman, recalled her isolation during school holidays:

> I didn't have any contact. There was one little girl who sometimes came to play. I think that was because her mum knew mine and it was a bit of a duty for her. We played together but, I couldn't really understand why she was coming. (Rae, 1996, p. 7.)

Even children who live at home and attend a special unit in a mainstream school can find themselves isolated from their peers in their immediate home environment. Peter, a young visually impaired man we interviewed (see French & Swain, 1997), said, 'It's hard because my friends are up there ... I find it hard to mix with them round here because I don't go to their school and I don't know them.'

We turn, in the second part of the article, to the voices of pupils in a day special school for pupils with physical disabilities. They are also voices from segregation, but speak from and of some very different experiences. Their experiences are particularly pertinent to our analysis in this paper as their school has been closed under a policy of 'inclusion'.

The Pupil Project

This analysis is based on a project conducted with pupils at Adamston School during the half-term before it closed. The project involved the planning for and production of a book of photographs by the pupils of things they wanted to remember about their school. We hoped to involve pupils in discussions about

Adamston, their experiences there, and their thoughts and feelings about the closure of the school and their future.

We worked with two groups: three primary aged pupils and four secondary pupils, who participated on a voluntary basis and whose parents were aware of their participation.

This project took place in the July before the school closed. Although six of the seven pupils knew which school they would be attending in September, one did not. The delay in being allocated school placements affected the time scale of our work. It had been felt by certain members of the LEA and school staff, that to interview children who had not yet received their school placements would heighten anxiety and could be unduly stressful for those pupils. We therefore waited until the end of the term when most pupils knew which school they were moving to. At the time of the interviews, the secondary pupils who were placed in new schools had all made visits to those schools, but all three primary aged pupils maintained that they had not seen their future school. The research project was carried out at the school over three sessions.

Session one involved pupils in the planning of the project. They decided what they were going to photograph and why the picture was important to them. A demonstration was provided in two ways:

- one of the researchers showed pictures of herself at work and explained why she had taken the photos;
- an instamatic camera was used with each group to allow the pupils to take trial photos.

The project was planned by each pupil drawing and noting (with the assistance of the researchers) possible pictures for the book. The session was tape-recorded and the tapes were transcribed.

Session two was the photo taking session. Each pupil was given a disposable camera to take photographs for inclusion in the book. The photos were taken in pairs: one for possible inclusion in the school memories book and the other for each pupil to have his or her own personal record of the school.

Session three involved pupils in selecting photos for and making both their own personal records and the school memories book. Each photo chosen for the school book was accompanied by a caption, which was discussed and agreed by each group. The school book, then, had two sections: one put together by the primary group; the other by the secondary group. This session was also tape-recorded and the tapes were transcribed.

We chose to use this method to try and elicit pupils' views about their school and its closure for the following reasons:

- Taking photographs was something the pupils would enjoy and that would engage their interest.
- Some of the pupils were young and some had learning difficulties, which could have made it difficult for them to develop abstract conversations and

concepts using direct interview techniques (Lewis & Lindsay, 2000). The concrete nature of the task could help focus their attention and discussion.

- The pupils would work on this in a group, and through talking about their experiences together we hoped the pupils would be more comfortable and more expansive.
- It would allow us to return to the topic at a future date with an obvious starting/reference point

It was clear that all the pupils were engaged in and enthusiastic about the project. As evident in quotations later in this paper, the photograph albums (both the one for the school and their personal album) were valued by the pupils. The project stimulated discussion both between the pupils themselves and with the researchers. Whilst this approach had a number of strengths in terms of the collection of data, there were a number difficulties.

All the children in this small sample were able to communicate verbally. Children using augmentative communication aides or with whom participation in standard communication would be difficult, were not included. We were acutely aware of not being able to listen to these children at this point, and hope to work with them in the future. There were two main reasons within this current project for working with verbally communicating children. First, due to late allocation of school places as described above, access had been slightly problematic and time became severely limited. We did not have the opportunity, therefore, to develop data collection methods using alternative communication systems with non verbal pupils. Secondly, whilst participation was on a voluntary basis, the children were suggested by their class teachers in terms of who they believed would be appropriate for the project, and therefore we relied upon their understandings of appropriateness.

There were ethical problems, including questions of informed consent. Though the pupils did seem enthusiastic, it was not clear whether the enthusiasm was directed at the project or was motivated by the opportunity to be absent from regular classes.

Though the views of a small number of pupils could be explored in depth we had no control over the explanations provided by teachers. We did find that we had to devote some time to explanations at the start of session one. There were limitations, too, in sampling. By asking the staff to recommend pupils we were unsure as to whether there was any selection of pupils other than on a voluntary basis. We were aware that there were other children who could have different views about Adamston and its closure, who were not put forward by the staff.

Given the hierarchy of adult/child interactions and the focus we gave our work compared to the immediate interests of the pupils, our awareness of directing their thoughts and contributions was necessarily heightened. We tried not to use direct questions, but allowed the pupils to develop conversations around the photographs.

Deciding what was pertinent within the data was complex and we tried to avoid 'lazy interpretation', as described by Alderson & Goodey (1996), that concentrates on inconsequential responses furnished by the children. It was not always easy, however, to spot the 'consequential' responses and there were times

within our first trawl of the data when children's responses were ignored as irrelevant, but later thought to be extremely pertinent. The basis for choosing relevance tended to be when the children insisted on having discussions, sometimes along *with* the researchers, but sometimes *despite* them.

We found too that pupils' thoughts and feelings about their future placements and the reorganisation were not easily addressed. The immediate focus for the project was the immediate context for the pupils, that is the closure of their school, their memories of the school and what they valued. The more abstract questions about their future had to be raised by the researchers.

Views from Adamston

Perhaps inevitably the pupils' discussions covered a wide range of topics. However, three broad themes did recur:

- education as an experience in itself;
- inclusion as belonging;
- feelings of exclusion.

Education as an Experience in Itself

Their experiences were predominantly positive and related almost wholly to the quality of the experiences themselves, rather than to any educational standards or aims. The teachers who featured in the books, for instance, were said to be 'cool' or a 'good laugh', rather than because they were skilled at teaching. The school was valued as 'the best' because it was 'different'.

Pupil: This school's much better. I wish it had never closed.

Pupil: There's something different about this school.

Researcher: So what's different about this school?

Pupils: Lots of things. Horses. Sports Hall. The teachers are different. They're funny.

When asked what they would miss, 'friends' was the first answer and most pupils had predominantly taken photographs of their friends. They appeared to have very strong friendship bonds with each other across both gender and age range.

Amongst the secondary pupils there was the general camaraderie of leg pulling and teasing, often around 'snogging', 'skipping lessons together behind the sports hall', the 'disgusting nature of school dinners' ('I'd rather eat horse muck'), people being 'boring farts', and their mutual purported dislike of anything that suggested work, e.g. 'Maths. French. IT.'

The primary pupils demonstrated their strong friendships in a much more straightforward manner. 'I like knocking about with my friends. I like C. I really like knocking about with him because he's a real sort of friend.' They showed confidence

in their friendships. When one child stated that 'my favourite things I like doing is playing with my friends', another's immediate response was 'he must mean me'.

There was evidence within both the secondary and primary pupils' talk of mutual understanding and recognition of the needs of others for greater amounts of help at certain times. For example, all the secondary children were keen to place a photograph of S, a wheelchair user, in their album. When deciding on the caption one suggestion was:

> *Pupil:* Every week S's class goes out [said with a trace of envy in his voice]

> *Pupil:* Yes, but that's not really their problem because at the weekend they can't get out so they have to go out with the teacher. They can't get out with their parents because their wheelchairs are too heavy.

The relationships with the staff in all areas of the school were consistently highly valued by all seven pupils. It was cited as the aspect of the school they would praise most highly. They described them as 'funny', 'mental', 'dead crazy', 'excellent', but also as 'kind' and 'helpful', not only towards them but towards their friends.

> *Researcher:* Why do you want a picture of J [staff member] in this book?

> *Pupil:* Because she's nice and she helps, she helped M anyway

> *Pupil:* She helped me and all.

The pupils had a lot to say about their shared history. Some children had taken photographs of the nursery because they said that was where they had originally met their friends; it was their history. A number of the pupils appeared to be fascinated by the fact that the Teachers' Centre had once been the school, and so wanted to include a photograph of that in their book. Another source of evidence of shared history came from discussions around performances and outings they had made. The primary school pupils described a band they had formed. They had played to the school and remembered how it had made them feel.

> *Pupil:* We get together as a group and we practice and then we put on a show for everyone.

> *Pupil:* Even the physios.

> *Pupil:* And it's great because we're all excited.

> *Pupil:* Do you feel all good inside when you've done something?

This led to a number of 'feeling good' and 'do you remember' conversations among the pupils that were about doing things together and being part of something within school.

Inclusion as Belonging

Some judgements of Adamston were embedded in the pupils' expression of loss at the closure of the school. Some expressions of the loss of the community were

poignant. One pupil told us, 'The thing is the school is closing. And the thing is when you leave a school you can come back to see it, but we cant come back and see it.' Another, talking about the book of photographs, stated, 'So like you know when I go to my new school I'll be able to take this and show them who my old teacher was. And I won't know how I'll be able to see my old teacher, and I wanted to be able to see this.' The central theme seemed to be pupils' feelings of inclusion in the Adamston community in the sense of belonging.

The school had a small residential unit (referred to as 'rest'), which provided the secondary pupils the opportunity for overnight stays. This, it seemed, was consistently highly valued and would be missed.

> *Pupil:* Resi is going to be a really big one for me. It's absolutely excellent. It's probably one of the best things about the school.
>
> *Researcher:* What do you like about resi?
>
> *Pupil:* You don't have to be at home being bored. All your friends are there ... your own room.

The school had riding stables and many of the children found it hard to imagine leaving the horses.

> *Pupil:* Well I do really want to see them again and I will see them again but I know I'll not see them at school, but I can sometimes come and visit them can't I? Or even there might be some at my other school ... cos this is one of the things I want to do ... I've got loads of photos of Sparky [horse] here.

The pupils struggled to understand loss. A primary pupil who had been known to one researcher when she was young, but whom she had not seen for four years, appeared to use this experience as a spring board to try and develop her understanding about loss and connections. Despite the researcher inexpertly trying to return the conversation to the topic of Adamston, the pupil repeatedly asked questions and made statements about having known the researcher. This can be seen as an exploration of her own previous experience of history, loss and change.

> *Pupil:* It's really sad that I'm going.
>
> *Researcher:* Do you think you'll enjoy your new school though?
>
> *Pupil:* Well, here I will come back and see them.
>
> *Researcher:* But they are not going to be here are they?
>
> *Pupil:* Yes they are. [said in a questioning voice but also assertive]
>
> *Researcher:* Who is?
>
> *Pupil:* You know Mrs T? She'll still be here ... I've got [lists children] in already. Have you known me for ages?

Researcher: I knew you when you were little, yes. But I haven't seen you for a long time. Your mum used to bring you to the hydrotherapy pool at the Centre.

Pupil: Did you used to work there?

Researcher: Yes. And then you went to AW Nursery

Pupil: Did you come and see me there?

Researcher: Yes, I saw you there as well.

Pupil: So did you used to come to my house.

Researcher: No, I don't know where you live.

Pupil: It's in [region of the city].

Researcher: I would go past it but I didn't come to your house.

Pupil: Do you know [gives her address], its got a red door. Do you know the one? You go past the fence, my next door neighbours fence, and my house is in the middle. [...]

Pupil: You know when you were at the Centre, what did we used to call you?

Researcher: T, you've always called me that.

Pupil: Didn't we call you 'Mrs' something?

Researcher: No, we've always called ourselves by name at the Centre.

This pupil had clearly set an agenda here and was determined to direct the conversation. Her insistence demonstrated the importance for her of teasing out history, renewed contacts and change.

The primary pupils repeatedly talked about using the photographs they had taken as a link between the past and the future

Researcher: Why do you want to keep these [particular photographs].

Pupil A: They have all my memories in ... and I want to take some of my friends in secondary ... because they have been my friends for quite a long time

Pupil B: Physios. I want to take a picture of them in this school and then in my new school.

The older pupils offered their thoughts on leaving the school less readily than the primary children, but when they did, their conversations included both anger and sadness. In a conversation about why the school might be closing, one pupil suggested the Governors were to blame.

Researcher: So you think the governors have closed the school?

Pupil: Yes.

Researcher: Why do you think they wanted to do that?

Pupil A: Because they opened their big mouths.

Pupil B: It's not fair. It's not fair on anyone. It's not fair on us.

Researcher: In what way?

Pupil: Because there's a lot of people here that need help, physios ... and it's not fair on them.

Feelings of Exclusion

In separate interviews, their parents had reported what they considered evidence of anxious behaviour, one parent reporting that her child had restarted having fits during this unsettled time. Teachers too reported incidents of unsettled behaviour within the school such as a certain amount of disinterest and disaffection within the classroom that was uncommon in that environment. The central theme embedded in pupils' anxieties seemed to be feelings of exclusion from Adamston, their school.

There was evidence within the interviews that pupils were feeling anxious. Most had worries about their new placement. When asked if they were feeling they were going to be all right in their new school, they offered a mixed response ranging from definite 'no' and 'yes', to 'probably' and 'don't know' replies. With secondary school pupils replies were often tinged with teenage bravado and it was not always possible to engage in conversations with them about their thoughts on their new schools.

All the pupils, both primary and secondary, said how they would miss their friends, especially as they did not live in the same neighbourhoods and Adamston was the main point of contact. One primary pupil, whilst acknowledging he was going to miss his friends, was pragmatic about this and was making arrangements to go and stay with them. He also said:

> *Pupil:* It's quite a big move and I'm a little bit frightened and it's going to be funny at first but I think I'll get into it.

Secondary pupils reported:

> *Researcher:* You went to (mainstream) again on Tuesday?
>
> *Pupil A:* Got more homework.
>
> *Pupil B:* It was rubbish.
>
> *Researcher:* Why was it? Why do you say that?
>
> *Pupil B:* Because it's not like Adams, it's not a special school. Plus it's boring. All the teachers are boring.
>
> *Researcher:* Why do you want to go to a special school?
>
> *Pupil B:* Because I've got (medical conditions) and I'm incontinent.
>
> *Researcher:* And you don't think they can cope with that in a mainstream school?
>
> *Pupil B:* No. [An emphatic no which ended this discussion]

Others worried about practical details that had not yet been resolved, such as transport. Many pupils took photographs of the Adamston bus drivers and the buses. They associated them with 'great trips out' and 'getting out of lessons'. The bus photographs prompted a discussion with a primary pupil who, whilst looking at all his photographs of the bus, stated that his new school was not near his home and he did not know how he would get to his new school.

One primary pupil, who had not been placed in the local school attended by his sibling, despite it having an additionally resourced centre for children with physical disabilities, worried both about the travel across the city and the size of the classes. He reported that he had seen his younger sibling in a large class and didn't know how he himself would manage, but he was pragmatic about it: 'they decide what's best for us and I'm willing to take a chance ... I'm willing to do it.' He could not tell us why such choices had been made and he himself had not been involved in the decision making. A secondary child referred to this non involvement in decision making.

> *Pupil:* Well most of the kids here have to go to mainstream. I'm going to Daleview (special school). That's the only school I can go to.

> *Researcher:* Why are you going to Daleview? Did you decide you wanted to go to Daleview?

> *Pupil:* No I got a letter. From the Civic Centre.

> *Researcher:* So they decided?

> *Pupil:* Well, yes. And my mam. The first time my mam went to visit the school they wouldn't let us go.

Some of the secondary pupils felt the closure had not been fair, on either themselves or others and felt quite angry about it. Others could engage with their new school, to a certain extent, and were beginning to make visits, but demonstrated mixed emotions and loyalties.

> *Researcher:* And what do you think of the [new] school generally? Do you like going there?

> *Pupil A:* Yes, but this school's better ...

> *Pupil B:* This school's much better ... in Harpers Lee you get shouted at all the time.

> *Researcher:* Did you get shouted at when you went?

> *Pupil A:* No.

> *Pupil B:* We were late so we got shouted at.

Including Insider Voices From Segregated Settings

One way of interpreting the views of disabled people documented in this paper is in

terms of the pros and cons, or arguments for and arguments against, segregated schooling. This has been the dominant discourse since the 1944 Education Act, if not since the inception of mass schooling. Given that there has been no significant decrease in the numbers of disabled pupils placed in segregated schooling over the past 30 years, this debate is at best sterile and, at worst, maintains the status quo.

There is another way of understanding these views and experiences, however, which looks towards inclusive education. Listening to the insider voices from the wide variety of experiences in segregated settings, from historical contexts and Adamston, we are struck first and foremost by the variety itself. They speak of abuse, but also of belonging. If there is a dominant common story, it is of subjugation in a context of unequal power relations between disabled and non-disabled people. Historically, it is a story of disabled children being subjected to various forms of abuse. At Adamston, it is a story of disabled children being subjected to the loss of their community, originally created by non-disabled people through a policy of segregation and then terminated by non-disabled people in the name of inclusion.

Adamston was a small community which provided social, emotional and psychological security for these young people. It is not at all surprising that young people want to hold on to the community they are part of. The re-organisation—closure of their school and placement in the new system—has been done to these young people. They (even more than their parents) have been powerless. The idea that pupils could or should be involved in policy-making or even decisions about their placement in the re-organised education system did not arise for the pupils themselves or anyone else involved. They were completely excluded from the consultation process and did not attend their annual reviews at which decisions about their placement in the re-organised system were discussed. Only once did a pupil appear at her own annual review. She burst into the room asking, 'What are you saying about me?' The meeting immediately stopped and she was gently ejected. The decision at the meeting was that this 14-year-old should attend a mainstream school. No account has been taken of these disabled pupil's views in the planning of inclusive settings. No account has been taken of what these young people valued about their education, how their views might affect processes of change, or what they would look for, and need to feel included, in a so-called inclusive setting. Similarly, no account has been taken of disabled adults' views, their experiences, their culture.

From the evidence in this paper, insider voices from segregated schooling have much to say about inclusion and the process of changing towards an inclusive system, whether they are the voices of disabled adults who speak from experiences of abuse or they are the voices of disabled young people who speak from experiences of belonging in a long established community. We shall pin-point just four specific messages.

1. There are positive personal and social effects for disabled people of being with similarly disabled people. Inclusion cannot be realised through the denial of disability.

2. Inclusion has a powerful psychological dimension of belonging. Whilst being included in educational policy terms is about having access to ostensible universal standards of education, the confidence that comes from social inclusion is the context for such access.

3. Moving pupils around the system of schooling, especially outside their own neighbourhoods, has dramatic and traumatic consequences for the lives of individuals.

4. Young disabled people can tell us what inclusion means for them.

Most important, however, is the general message that moves towards a more inclusive education system must begin with the inclusion of the voices of disabled children and adults. Insider voices from segregated schooling should inform the processes of change from a segregated to an inclusive education system, if 'inclusion' is not to perpetuate the subjugation of disabled people in other settings.

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Parents' Perspectives on the Closure of a Special School: towards inclusion in partnership.

Parents' Perspectives on the Closure of a Special School: towards inclusion in partnership

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ABSTRACT   *This study reports parents' reflections on their experiences during the reorganisation following an English local education authority's (LEA) adoption of a policy of inclusion for young disabled people. It shows the parents' changing notions of 'partnership' with the LEA and their attempts to make sense of what policy-makers are telling them in the light of their own knowledge of their children's educational needs. Implications from the research are drawn to inform policy and practice in relation to the inclusion of young disabled people and partnership with parents.*

Introduction

Under the policy of inclusion a number of local education authorities (LEAs) are reorganising their provision for children with special educational needs (SENs). These reorganisations generally involve the closure of some special schools, the establishment of new special schools and the provision of units or resource centres in mainstream schools. This paper explores the experiences and views of parents during the period leading to the closure of Adamston, a school for primary and secondary-aged pupils with physically disabilities, in one such reorganisation in Romantown [1], an LEA in the north of England.

The need for partnership with parents has been recognised in government policy in current moves towards inclusive education in this country (DFE, 1994) and in most of the member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (Labon, 1997). It was identified as a main principle by Romantown LEA in their review of provision for pupils with SENs who further stressed that parents 'should be involved from the outset in the decision making process'. Positive collaborative and co-operative working practices between the LEA and the Adamston parents could have developed yet the potential for such partnership was not to be realised. The LEA sought to implement its proposals for change whilst trying to persuade the parents that these changes would enhance their children's educational opportunities. The parents of the pupils, however, fought to save the special school. Following a ballot, the school sought Grant Maintained status (although unsuccessfully) which would have taken the school outside the LEA's control. A number of parents sought to stop the reorganisation by taking their case to court.

In this paper we hope to illuminate some of the underlying facets that served to turn the closure of this particular school into a distressing experience for the parents involved. We also challenge assumptions that these parents were simply 'against inclusion'. The research shows parents growing critical of the processes and the management of the reorganisation. The data also suggest the parents' vision of the possibilities for a more inclusive education system and how this could be achieved.

The Reorganisation

Over 2% of pupils in the 5–15 age range attended special schools in Romantown, one of the highest rates in England. The LEA planned a 'significant reduction in the level of segregation' and to 'extend the continuum of provision on offer for pupils with special educational needs'. All the special schools in the city would close. Following this, six new special schools would be opened: two offering places for children with 'profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD), severe learning difficulties and associated physical difficulties' (one primary, 2–11 and one secondary, 11–19); one school for children aged 3–19 with 'PMLD and/or challenging behaviours including severe communication disorders/autism'; and three schools for children with 'emotional and behavioural difficulties'. A number of additionally resourced units (ARUs) within mainstream schools, including three for children with physical difficulties (one secondary, two primary) were also to be established. The closure of Adamston was a cornerstone of the plan. This school, established in the 1920s, had a good local reputation and had been highly praised by OfSTED. There would no longer be a designated school for children with physical disabilities.

Research Method

The parents of slightly over two thirds of the 96 pupils at Adamston were interviewed (65 families). At the time of the interviews the closure of Adamston by the LEA had become a certainty. The interviews were conducted after the parent(s) had attended their child's annual review during which the placement of their child in the reorganised system was discussed. An open-ended interview style was adopted covering parents' experiences of and views about the reorganisation and inclusion. In most instances the researcher conducting the interview also attended the review (with the permission of the parents) as an observer. Each interview lasted approximately half an hour, was recorded and fully transcribed. Some interviews were conducted with individual parents, others with both parents, and others with other family members present, such as grandparents.

The Parents' Perspectives

In the following analysis, we concentrate solely on the viewpoint of parents and other family members who attended the annual reviews. All the quotations are from these participants. The main recurring themes within the interviews are summarised to reflect shared experiences and views. The interviews were conducted two terms before the closure of Adamston school when families were beginning to address the future in terms of the anticipated changes. Whilst all parents and family members interviewed were positive about the educational opportunities and wider support their child had received during their time at Adamston, almost all were also positive about

the philosophy of children with SENs attending their local mainstream school. This is illustrated by the following quotations from two mothers:

> Ideally I want my child to go to school with our next door neighbour. Inclusion with so called normal children, whatever a normal child is, he doesn't get it here.

> Mixing with children that don't need special needs, mixing with the community that he's sort of grown up in and the children that are going to be around him, probably work with him, live near him and everything, getting to know what life is like outside school, so what I'm saying is that he's going to be able to make new friends with able bodied children ....

Only one interviewee said she could not envisage any circumstances in which she would want her child to attend a mainstream school. For all other interviewed parents inclusion in their local mainstream school was the ideal. However, as outlined below, they repeatedly voiced concerns and serious reservations about the processes adopted by the LEA in its move to develop a more inclusive system, and provided their own visions of an inclusive system and how it might be achieved.

Processes and Management of Change

The LEA had circulated a planning document to parents and professionals outlining their proposals and asking for comments. One of the main themes arising from the interviews was that this consultation document included some proposals that were non-negotiable, including the closure of Adamston. The parents felt very strongly that they should have been brought into the LEA planning process at the beginning so that their expertise as parents and carers could be utilised. They felt they had knowledge and information that could have helped the LEA to develop a greater understanding of the children's needs and perhaps have resulted in alternatives to certain plans. One father succinctly expressed the frustration experienced by parents:

> Instead of sitting down and asking the parents how to go about it, they didn't. They said 'Right we're closing Adamston, your kids will be in units, that's it' and then they waited for everybody to shout and everybody to get angry rather than sit down with the parents and say, 'Look this is what we're going to do, what do you think as a parent' ... But [the LEA officials] didn't, they stood there in their suits and said you will do this.

Once the LEA had outlined their plans, parents wanted clear information about future provision for their children and the implications of this for their child's wider education. However, the parents described the information they received from the LEA as 'infrequent', 'jumbled', 'muddled' and 'conflicting'. From the parents' viewpoint, the LEA tended to provide information at irregular intervals, often containing new or revised information about the reorganisation. This could be seen from the LEA perspective as keeping parents up to date as they made changes to the plans but generally it reinforced the parents' perceptions that the LEA had made insufficient provision for children. These changes left them feeling bewildered, anxious and confused. One parent summarised her experiences as follows:

> Every time we get some new information about the schools that are

available for your child and everything, the set up of the kind of children
that they are going to be involved with, and take on, has changed again.

Parents expressed doubt about the validity of the information given to them by the
LEA. In their research looking at parents choosing secondary schools, Ball and
Vincent (1998) noted the scepticism around the 'official' or 'cold' knowledge
normally constructed for public dissemination, compared to 'grapevine' or 'hot'
knowledge that emanates from the direct experience of those in similar circum-
stances. As one father explained, this scepticism was reinforced for the Adamston
parents by events such as finding out about changes before they were formally told:

> They [the LEA] always seem to be two steps behind what you've heard
> unofficially on the grapevine. So because of that it looks as if, because
> you're hearing information third hand, when you do get information from
> them the goal posts have changed because it's not the information that you
> first got. So then you feel that things are happening underhand ....

This left room for doubt and confusion as to what might be happening but also
conjecture as to why they were not immediately given that information.

Officers of the LEA did make repeated visits, some pre-planned but others on the
request of parents, to explain certain issues or happenings. It would seem, however,
that this feeling of 'being done to' rather than being consulted and actively engaged
in the development, resulted in a polarisation of viewpoints that became entrenched
and embittered. For example, a parent offered a representative view of a meeting
addressed by an LEA officer:

> I think all of us could have lynched [the LEA officer]. He stood there so
> arrogant, you know, and said 'Well really you have no rights, you can say
> you'd like your child to go to such and such a school but you don't have
> the right'.

Parents at Adamston tended to interpret the absence of a continuous presence of
representatives from the LEA, for instance at annual reviews, as a lack of interest in
their opinions, a way of getting the LEA plans forced through, perhaps as an
unwillingness to recognise and address difficulties in the reorganisation as they
arose. Feeling disempowered to affect change within the reorganisation, parents felt
angry and frustrated. For these parents, this was not a move towards inclusion
through negotiation, as illustrated by the following quotation:

> I mean they said they would talk to us and we did talk and we made our
> views and they were really strongly spoken but their decision had been
> made before that, you know, I mean we all knew that. No matter how much
> lobbying we did or anything, the letters were wrote, everything.

The options parents had were between accepting or not accepting the predetermined
route set by the LEA, and they did not see this as genuine choice. Parents were angry
at having their children placed in new provision, not of their choice and which they
considered would not be sufficiently able to meet their child's needs to the high
standard they felt Adamston had provided. In addition to this, decisions about school
placement were still being made as the school closed. A small minority of children
were leaving Adamston in July not knowing where they were going in September.

Goodey (1992) pointed out that for parents of children with SENs their child can

become their way of life, and if it is threatened, then that family's whole existence is threatened. An Adamston parent captures the trauma of families' experiences in this reorganisation as follows:

> I mean we've got to be happy with where our children are and I mean it affects your whole family, it really does. It affects grandparents, it affects aunts, uncles, it affects cousins, it affects everybody. Your whole life is just, all you think about is where is she going to go, what's going to happen? If you have a special needs child, you've got a special needs family, they go hand in hand.

Visions of Inclusion

Through a process of identifying what they considered to have been good about Adamston and analysing their own child's needs, parents raised concerns about their children being placed in ARUs in mainstream schools. On the basis of the interviews, it seemed that the aspects of the reorganisation that most worried parents were:

- the size of the mainstream schools as compared to the small special school;
- staff/pupil ratios in class and beyond (particularly lack of supervision during break times);
- safety particularly in the playground (connected mainly with supervision issues);
- that being within the busy, complex environment of a mainstream school would reduce the educational progress of their child;
- lack of staff experience in working with children with medical and other needs might result in them not being able to recognise or know how to meet the complex needs (educational, social and emotional) of their child;
- allocation of resources to their child would be reduced;
- reduced access to medical facilities;
- that their child would be teased and bullied;
- that their child would become alienated from the rest of the pupils;
- that the identified schools were not their local mainstream schools.

As they did not see their anxieties being addressed by the LEA, many parents concluded that, even where they believed their child could manage the curriculum in mainstream school with help and support, their only choice was to fight for a place in the remaining special schools for pupils with learning difficulties. A parent, who had been to visit the mainstream school where her child was to be placed, told us:

> When you go and look around the school, it's not really the parents choice, it's what they are applying at that school, that you've just got to take it or leave it. I said 'What if I don't like [the mainstream] School, what's my choice?' and [the educational psychologist] just went ... with her arms up in the air. So you have no choice.

From the parents' standpoint, the policy-makers' main justification for the reorganisation was that the new arrangements would provide more options for children. Instead of there just being a special school or a local mainstream school placement, there would now be a 'continuum of provision' which would provide a 'greater understanding of the range of needs'. As Riddell (2000) states, however, 'tensions between the principles of integration/inclusion and choice have characterised special

educational needs policy in the UK for two decades' (p. 115). Many parents noted that whilst there was an increase in the range of provision, it did not actually represent an extension of their personal choice for their child. Parents concluded that this would result in increased alienation and segregation for their child.

> This exercise of inclusion has made things worse ... as far as I can see, because what's happened now is the other schools are going to say 'Well actually we are not set up for that, these special resourced schools are meant to be taking you.'

Some parents questioned the reorganisation on the very basis of its conception. They wondered whether the intention of the LEA to be more inclusive would be borne out in reality, as exemplified by a quotation from the mother of a 10 year-old pupil:

> I don't know whether it will work as such, 'cos to me, inclusion ... to me meant they went to their local school with support. Not to say [a main-stream school with an ARU] because that to me becomes another special school because the majority of them will go there.

Some parents, then, were questioning the fundamental principles of the proposal in terms of its intention to develop inclusive provision for children with special educational needs. They pointed out that only a selected few pupils from Adamston were to be given access to a selected few mainstream schools. One mother expressed the commonly held view that 'inclusion' in Romantown meant fitting children to the system, rather than all schools adapting to educate all children.

> It will not work if the schools don't adapt for the special needs either. I cannot understand why they want them to go into mainstream schools when they're not adapting to all their needs.

In almost all the interviews, the parents proceeded to consider how all children could be educated together and discussed the development of a more inclusive system. Almost all parents believed that the reorganisation had been done too quickly, that too much had been attempted at once as one parent expressed succinctly:

> If you are going to reorganise you've got to give it more time and involve the parents from much earlier on than what they did. That was their biggest mistake.

They believed in doing things in small, incremental stages reflecting the findings of Thomas *et al.* (1998) who stressed that if inclusive projects were to be successful, they needed to be 'kept to a small scale' (p. 142). One parent felt that:

> Romantown had this wonderful opportunity just to start with one or two and just include everybody in those and change slowly the whole city's education policy.

Whilst they wanted to start small, some parents' ideas were big:

> Really, I would like a new school to be built where all children are equal and you treat the whole child because you need to educate the whole person.

Another parent recognised that Romantown LEA had an opportunity to remove the notion of special and mainstream schooling and to develop a new philosophy and

practice, establishing a truly comprehensive system "Romantown now have the opportunity to be the flagship of Europe really, we could have scrapped the whole idea of special school and mainstream school".

Conclusion: towards inclusion in partnership with parents

Why, then, did a group of parents, who clearly wished their children to attend their local mainstream school, end up fighting for the retention of segregated provision? This case study of how it was in Romantown offers understandings of how the development of policy and its implementation could be improved. We conclude by characterising the views of Adamston parents, though we would emphasise that 'parent stories are many, not one' (Ware, 1999, p. 64).

First, the idea of partnership and communication with parents was seen as seriously compromised from the parents' point of view. There had been an opportunity for the reorganisation to be developed in tandem with parents whose ultimate aim was to see their child in mainstream education. However, when the parents began to feel that all the decisions had been made and that there was nothing left to be developed, battle lines were drawn. They felt that their only option was to retain what they could from the old segregated system because they believed it would offer the best opportunities for their child under the present circumstances. LEA planning documents had not been clear about where, how, what and when parents could contribute to decision-making. As a consequence the ideas of this knowledgeable group of parents were either unheard or ignored. They became a seriously under-utilised resource.

This suggests that LEAs should clearly identify what they mean by, and want from, partnership with parents. Parents need to be involved from the outset in the policy-making and the planning, and this includes the work with mainstream schools moving towards inclusive education. To make such radical changes without trauma-tising those directly involved, understandings need to be developed through collaborative, participatory partnerships, which are valued by all parties. Hearing parents' real needs is a complex undertaking. It demands time and in-depth conversations to develop a clearer picture of how parents view their child's education, as in Dale's (1996) 'negotiating model' of partnership. This model of partnership recognises that dissent may be a major factor in the parent–professional relationship and plans should be made to use it constructively. She describes it as:

> a working relationship where the partners use negotiation and joint decision-making and resolve differences of opinion and disagreement, in order to reach some kind of shared perspective or jointly agreed decision on issues of mutual concern. (Dale, 1996, p. 14)

The second theme to address is parents' conceptualisation of an inclusive education system. From the standpoint of parents, the reorganisation of the schools had not contributed to understanding the needs of their children or providing increased educational opportunities, but merely moved the Adamston children to different schools. Their suggestions for a truly inclusive system started with the mainstream schools, where they believed inclusion was being tolerated rather than celebrated and embraced. They saw inclusion as a process of radically changing the nature of mainstream understandings rather than merely closing down some special schools and placing as many children as would fit into current mainstream provision. In their

envisaged process of change, a much longer time scale was required so that parents of children with special needs, teachers and the wider community could begin to understand the needs and rights of all children. The aim was large scale: all schools would include all pupils, otherwise selection and segregation would remain giving the worst of all worlds. The message appeared to be that LEAs need not be afraid of change if they let the parents help them develop understandings.

Kenworthy and Whittaker (2000) suggest that ending the segregation of children 'depends on achieving a consensus, a shared conviction between young people, parents and survivors of segregation, educationalists and policy makers'. Currently it seems that 'the system all but silences parents' (Ware, 1999, p. 64). As Goodey asks, how do we persuade policy-makers that parents 'may have theoretical understandings and perceptions of social reality' (1999, p. 2) and that by trusting them and learning with them, new opportunities may be found?

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NOTE

[1] To protect anonymity the fictitious names Adamston and Romantown are used.

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Reflecting and learning together: action research as a vital element of developing understanding and practice.

Reflecting and Learning Together: action research as a vital element of developing understanding and practice

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ABSTRACT This article details how an action research/reflective practitioner approach added value to the efforts of participants who were engaged in developing their practice and working together within a New Labour area-based policy initiative. The process of reflecting and learning together in the project supported practitioners in thinking, learning about, designing, engaging in and changing elements of their practice according to the evidence they had gathered. A key element of the article is how the notion of reflection 'in' action and 'on' action (Schön) supported people from different backgrounds and settings in understanding and developing their practice through improving self-knowledge and confidence and, in turn, their knowledge of other perspectives. The article raises issues in relation to the use of action research at the interface between micro- and macro-development, individual and group work, and worker and manager perspectives. It concludes by suggesting some of the issues that those engaged in further development of innovative, interagency and interdisciplinary projects might need to address if an action research/reflective practice model of working together for change is to be made more widely available, relevant and useful.

Introduction

Following the 1997 General Election the New Labour Government introduced a number of policy initiatives for families and young children. These initiatives, be they Early Excellence Centres (EECs),[1] Educational Action Zones (EAZs) [2] or Sure Start [3], aim to both counter social exclusion and raise educational standards. They have, as a stated preferred

working practice, the requirement for agencies to work together, with families, to develop high quality community services.

This article details how an action research/reflective practitioner approach added value to the efforts of participants who were engaged in developing their practice under the auspices of an EAZ programme. It focuses on a group of practitioners, including parents, who perceived their roles changing in relation to their background, training and/or expectations, and who volunteered to be involved in an action research project to develop their understandings and practice. The project was facilitated by a researcher experienced in using action research in developing her own professional understandings, and now using it on a broader level to develop interprofessional and transdisciplinary (Doyle, 1997) understandings.

As the project progressed the practitioners highlighted 'working together' as a key element to practice development within the EAZ and beyond. A key element of the article is, therefore, how the notion of reflection 'in' action and 'on' action (Schön, 1990) supported people from different backgrounds and settings in understanding and developing their practice through improving self-knowledge, and working together more actively and effectively.

The article uses two themes, 'clarifying and developing understandings of practice', and 'how we begin to think and work together across boundaries' to help illustrate the issues raised in terms of practitioner self-knowledge and inter-practitioner understanding.

Finally, the article makes observations on why and how the action research approach might be adapted and used by others, the value of such an account being that: 'it gets sufficiently close to the underlying *structure* to enable others to see potential similarities with other situations' (Winter, 2000, p. 1).

Background

In June 1998, the New Labour Government in the United Kingdom launched what it described as a radical £75 million programme to drive up educational standards. This programme consisted of the establishment of 25 EAZs. Each Zone was to develop its own innovative approach to tackling deep-seated problems. They were seen as 'testbeds for innovation'. The Zones were considered most likely to be successful in their quest to improve performance in schools when whole communities concentrated their efforts in partnerships across sectors.

The Evaluation

A team from Northumbria University (UNN) was invited to develop an evaluation process for the early years strategy of the EAZ in one northern city. This city has well-documented areas of high deprivation and associated pockets of educational under-achievement. The EAZs are subject to

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monitoring and evaluation at National Government Level in the form of inspection by the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) and the production of annual reports. Whilst certain monitoring procedures are required by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) each EAZ can choose to evaluate their work in whatever way they see as being suitable to meet the needs of both the DfES and their own steering/management groups.

In setting up a local evaluation programme with the EAZ early years strategy the main concern of the UNN team was to help managers and participants to understand, develop and strengthen their work. Whilst accountability concerns are a necessary part of the evaluation, our focus was on evaluation for development and knowledge building reflecting the three perspectives on evaluation as proposed by Chelimsky & Shadish (1997):

- evaluation for development;
- evaluation for knowledge building;
- and evaluation for accountability.

From previous experience, we recognised the importance of making our approach to evaluation consistent with the aims and principles of the EAZ itself. Like Greene (1999) we emphasised the importance of promoting 'participatory citizenship'. The focus and scope of the local evaluation was therefore shaped by an evaluation sub-group of the EAZ Steering Committee. This consisted of a range of participants, including parents, practitioners from health and education, and the university evaluators.

During the first phase of the project a preliminary report had been undertaken to provide a baseline of practice and understandings. Following publication of the preliminary report, the evaluation sub-group requested more in-depth knowledge on a number of issues, including how agencies were working together to develop and innovate within early years initiatives. As part of this process of evaluation a reflective practice project was planned with the Born to Read [4] initiative.

'Born to Read' in this EAZ grew out of the Birmingham 'Book Start' Project. As this project had been thoroughly researched (Wade & Moore, 1998), it was considered unnecessary to try reproduce their work. The aim of this part of the evaluation was to look at 'Born to Read' in the light of some of the aims of the EAZ Early Years Strategy. It was to investigate how both parents and professionals view participation, what meanings are made of practice by those involved in practice and how, through research and reflection, historical understandings of practice can be challenged to facilitate new behaviours and ways of working.

The Reflective Practice Project: methodology

The work of the Reflective Practice Project (RPP) was loosely based on the Action Research Programme used by Goldsmiths College (1995). The fundamental aim of action research is to improve practice through: 'joint

reflection about the relationship in particular circumstance between processes and products' (Elliot, 1991, p. 50). The work at Goldsmiths College (1995) defined reflective practice as:

> a continuous cycle in which you select an area of your work to investigate, collect information about, reflect upon, then perhaps develop new ideas about ways of working and act upon those.

As such, this project, whist aiming to enable participants and the researcher to understand and make meanings from current practice, was also committed to supporting development during the project:

> What is specific to 'action research' as a form of inquiry is that it uses the experience of being committed to trying to improve some practical aspect of a practical situation as a means for developing our understanding of it. It is research conceived and carried out mainly by 'insiders', by those engaged in and committed to the situation, not by outsiders, not by 'spectators' (although outside 'facilitators' may also, indeed, have rather an important role to play). (Winter, 2002, p. 27)

An invitation to join the Reflective Practice Project was sent to the first group of parents to be part of the programme in this sector of the City and to all professionals engaged in the Born to Read Project (Library Staff, Health Visitors and Community Nursery Nurses who were funded by the EAZ, but managed through the health and library services). Participation was voluntary. Twelve people made positive responses; however, the project began with two parents, two health visitors, two nursery nurses and five library staff as participants. The timescale for involvement was one academic year.

As the number of participants in this project was relatively small (11), one Reflective Practice Group (RPG) could be formed, which enabled participants to meet together at regular intervals. As the lead evaluator I facilitated all the meetings. It was necessary to take the lead in the first meetings to support participants' exploration of the processes of undertaking reflective practice in their own settings, and the 'hows' and 'whys' of researching their own practice. As the programme developed, however, the meetings increasingly became practitioner driven. Practitioners presented, to each other, their accounts of research in practice, data they had collected, how they might understand that data and discoveries they had made. This was followed by a supportive, critical discussion and analysis of what had been presented. The aim of the meetings was to improve practice by:

> developing the practitioner's capacity for discrimination and judgement in particular, complex, human situations [and to unify] inquiry, the improvement of performance and the development of persons in their professional role. (Elliot, 1991, p. 52)

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The meetings were recorded in two ways. Notes were taken of all nine meetings. A brief summary of the discussion and suggestions for the following session was then sent, as a letter, to all participants. Most meetings were tape-recorded and their contents transcribed as the meetings also served as focus groups contributing to the research and evaluation process of the whole EAZ Early Years project.

In addition to the meetings, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with a cross-section of participants. These interviews covered topics such as understandings of the reason for and purpose of their current practice, their role within current practice, perceptions of inter-disciplinary understandings, propensity for change, and what might (for them) make change both necessary and possible.

The Projects

Six projects are presented here as vignettes to illustrate the use of reflective practice/action research with a variety of individuals working from a number of personal and professional perspectives. They highlight both the transdisciplinary nature of the project and how individuals used their involvement in the reflective practice project to both address their own understandings and to engage with others in developing those understandings.

Parents: working together:
reflections on adult/child communications

The two parents who participated in the project (I have called them Alison and Tamanna) began with very particular aims in mind.

Project 1. Alison, a young single parent living with her own mother, wanted to look at how her first child (who I have called Mark) engaged in play. As Grandma also spent time with Mark, Alison wanted to observe them together and to consider the nature of their play. Alison had not been involved in research or reflective practice before and was looking forward to having the opportunity of developing her understanding of how babies play, and how adults learn about and support that play.

Alison chose to use video as her observation and recording technique as she felt she would then be able to look at Mark very closely. Borrowing a video from the University she first recorded him at 5 months and then again at 10 months. On the basis of her observations and discussions with the group members, she decided to change the focus of her work, deciding that communication was actually at the heart of Mark's developing interest in play and on the development of his concentration skills. She therefore went on to analyse both videos in terms of his non-verbal and verbal communication, and how she and her mother responded to that. Through doing this she began to interpret meanings behind Mark's messages, and so entered into a much closer and satisfying dialogue with him that they both

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benefited from and enjoyed. Through her increased understanding of the meaning of Mark's communications, Alison discovered that she has helped him develop independent play skills. For example, she now shares eye contact with him much more frequently and so he is happy to play for longer without crying:

> I used to think he was just a worky-ticket [trouble-maker] when
> he cried, but now I know he just needs me to look at him, so now
> I do that before he cries and he can play for longer. I have also
> realised about the use of eye contact in other situations too, and
> not just with children! (Field notes)

Her project had come full circle. She had come back to supporting his play, but had used a different way to look at it and learnt some important things about their relationship on the way.

Project 2. The second parent, Tamanna, chose to use a diary form of recording, writing down particular incidents of story telling that her child used and then bringing this back to the group meeting for discussion. She came to realise that not only was her child using the stories to communicate, but the stories were often communicating things that she was finding difficult to understand in her life. Through these stories Tamanna tried to understand her child's perceptions of the world and this led her to consider her own, her mother's and her husband's notions of childhood. Tamanna's family embraced two different and distinct cultures, Tamanna and her mother being from the northeast of England, her father and her husband from Pakistan. As a result of listening to her daughter's stories she tried to work out a way in which she could support her child through times of change by recognising and addressing the impact of different understandings of childhood across different family members.

By the end of the project, both parents had shifted the focus of their work and yet had, in effect, addressed more complex notions of their original theme in the process.

Library Staff: working together to develop new understandings

Project 3. The Library Service had recently set up a new project aimed at working with families. In one area of the city they had considerable success, in another however, very few families had participated. One member of staff had wanted to look at what had caused such a radical difference in take-up of the project, and had devised quite ambitious questionnaire methods of investigating the role of both library staff and parents in this venture. As time progressed, however, she decided that there were other underlying features that affected whether people came to libraries, such as their perception of libraries as buildings, library staff as professionals and the types of behaviour practised in libraries. She then chose to concentrate on interviewing 'stakeholders' to allow her to get more insight into the constructs of people who used the libraries. Her first meeting/focus group

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took place with parents who used libraries. This was informative and she had felt she had learnt a lot. Following discussions with the Reflective Practice Group she subsequently interviewed a set of parents who were not connected with libraries and, in fact, were quite hostile to the idea of libraries and these parents gave their reasons why in an uncompromising manner. After her initial and understandable upset following the experience of interviewing a group parents who were being very critical of the service she was involved in, she recognised that this experience had provided her with a wealth of valuable information. It became a turning point in her understanding and thinking about how to approach parents, how parents perceived libraries and her perception of what parents might be thinking. The action plan she developed from this reflected her now strongly held belief, developed through and supported by her research, that parents' understandings are pivotal to successful library practices.

Project 4. Two other members of the Library staff jointly carried out a very different project. They had already begun to make particular collections of books for young children that could be used either in libraries or by other professionals working with young children. Their dilemma was to decide on what basis to include books. They had already begun by consulting other professionals who had given them some ideas, but they wanted to take this further. They called their work 'Promoting Inclusion: reflective practice'. Through interviews, questionnaires, focus groups and observations they developed a reflective practice approach to their work that broadened and deepened the consultation they had with other professionals, practitioners and with parents. They engaged in dialogue that went beyond the answering of predetermined questions and which began to unpick some of the key elements as to why resources might be practical, appropriate and useful for others. They went on produce an Action Plan that included ways of communicating with parents and professionals, an analysis of needs and understandings, evaluation and dissemination. This was a radical new way of working within this area and was subsequently incorporated into the Libraries' Early Years Strategy to be used across the City.

Nursery Nurses:
family perceptions of the Born to Read Project

Two nursery nurses (I have named Jane and Melanie) decided to look at family perceptions of the Born to Read Project. Although they were involved in the same aspect of the work, i.e. delivering the Born to Read project to families with young babies, they decided to look at different aspects of their practice.

Project 5. A fundamental part of the job of the EAZ nursery nurses is, on their first visit to a family, to introduce the Born to Read project, through the use of a locally made video. Jane chose to look at the use of the video in this situation. The making of the video had been a major investment, both

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in terms of time and philosophy for the managers of this Born to Read Project, and practitioners delivering it were very positive about its use. Jane chose to interview families about the video from their (the parents') perspective. She found that there were issues around the use of video that had not been raised prior to its introduction as a key tool in the project. The video, whilst being a very successful vehicle for communication with many families, could be quite distressing for others, particularly those with children with special educational needs. This led her to focus her project on developing her understanding of what made the video successful, where it might be less appropriate, and how she and others might approach new families in futures.

Project 6. Melanie wanted to try and find out what parents really felt about the entirety of the Born to Read scheme and how it was delivered. The fundamental principle of the Born to Read Programme is that it will raise the awareness of parents about the importance of books to young babies. She wanted to get parents' observations about how they and their babies might respond to books. She encountered (by design) two very different parental perceptions of the scheme and through this, engaged in discussion within the reflective practice group about the very nature of the delivery of the scheme. Although looking at a different aspect of the project her findings were quite similar to those of her colleague, Jane. The importance of recognising that parents may have very differing responses to the Born to Read approach and what might trigger certain responses became key issues in her research. Parents had some very different ideas about books as a form of communication and this led to both the nursery nurses, and the whole reflective practice group, having to think very carefully about how they made meanings from communications with others. The nursery nurses went on to suggest some ideas for developing their work, one of which could involve, in certain cases, limiting the use of the Born to Read video despite it originally being a pivotal aspect of their work.

Meetings of the Reflective Practice Group (RPG)

The purpose of the RPG meetings was twofold. First, through the work of the facilitator, the meetings were devised to support participants in their investigations and to encourage in-depth discussion about issues raised by their research. Each individual project was designed and directed by the practitioners themselves, but there was an intention to manage a process that would lead to the practical application of their knowledge. Facilitated by an experienced researcher external to the projects being undertaken, the RPG meetings both assisted the process of and acted as catalyst to identifying practical action plans for change. Secondly, the RPG meetings were an integral part of the action research process, being both formative and an arena for data collection.

Once they had overcome their initial worries about whether they would be judged and criticised, rather than supported, participants used the group

to both share success and talk about areas of difficulty. Topics of conversation tended to revolve around:

- what was good about their work and the way they practised their work;
- what was difficult about the above;
- were there institutional/professional/personal barriers to development and change?
- how did they know what was worth developing and where the barriers were – what had they done to gather 'evidence' about this?
- what was the difference between 'evidence' and knowledge gleaned by daily/long-standing experience; and
- how do you combine evidence, professional knowledge and general knowing?

A key element of being in the group for the EAZ participants was being able to discuss things with others. Discussion supported the process of beginning to see more clearly the significance and implications of what they chose to discuss and why they chose that topic to share with others. This discussion helped establish a 'platform of understanding' for themselves (Rickards, 1999, p. 6); to make meaning of the concepts they were using in daily life and what they were taken to mean within a given context and to begin to recognise which received wisdoms and orthodoxies have influenced their consciously and unconsciously held assumptions and beliefs. It encouraged and enabled participants to see that there were other perspectives, and to recognise the validity of the needs, requirements and understandings of others. More importantly, however, through articulating their own understandings, participants became more acutely aware of the own perspective and were, therefore, better able to recognise and question assumptions they had taken for granted.

The Main Themes

Two main themes were identified from the practitioner research and subsequent collective discourse:

- clarifying and developing understandings of practice, both our own and that of others;
- how we begin to think and work together across boundaries: questioning the power of dominant paradigms;

Theme One: clarifying and developing understandings of practice

Understanding Our Own Practice

The project did not prescribe a given structure for research methodology. Participants decided for themselves what they wanted to look at, how they wanted to conduct their research, and how they wanted to document and analyse it. Not having a given structure informing them about what to do

and how to do it was initially, for some, disempowering. Beginning to be comfortable with uncertainty, looking at their own beliefs and ideas, looking at their work holistically and beyond the normal professional/practitioner/parental boundaries, and not knowing what the findings might reveal both frightened and excited participants.

Many new starting points for thinking were constructed within the RPG meetings as people talked over aspects of their understandings from their own perspectives and looked at that in the light of the data they had collected. For this participant, finding out where to start thinking was an interesting and important process:

> I don't know about anybody else but I'm getting a great deal out
> of the sessions, really enjoy them. Just coming here ... busy
> chatting on and things like that you know. I really do find out
> about thinking in other ways, and about other peoples' thinking
> – like teachers, every teacher seems to have a different view of
> what the library is for. Now that would make a good project,
> finding out what they think libraries are for. (Transcript from
> meetings)

As they explored their professional focus participants began to recognise the influence of their own personal understandings and perspectives on their work. They spent time discussing their views and perspectives on children, childhood, how they approached working with children and families in the light of their beliefs and where their 'beliefs' came from. The process of engaging in action research led participants to highlight the strengths of their work, but also the highly personal and contextual basis of their views, beliefs and practices:

> we used to choose books on the basis of we know why, 'cause
> we're taught at library school that this is a good book because of
> ... but now we know how parents, or some parents, choose this
> and that, there is a whole variety of incidences to think about ...
> (Transcript from meetings)

When they started the Reflective Practice Project, library staff in Project 4 felt intuitively that what they were doing was 'not right', but had, with some discomfort and unease, continued that work, shaped as it was by their notions of the imperatives of their professional role and the pressures of daily working practice commitments. Exploring some of the thoughts that had been in their minds, but had either consciously or unconsciously been pushed into the background, became an important aspect of their discussion at the RPG meetings. Through articulating their understandings and beliefs they began to take a critical stance on 'taken for granted' knowledge. Explaining why certain actions had been taken helped overcome the dilemma of how to raise issues that might be difficult and why they had been reluctant to face them.

The RPG meetings offered the opportunity to reflect, challenge, disturb the known and given, and then reflect again on what might be. The meetings involved looking at what had been made tangible through individual research projects, and had an emancipatory effect in that they sparked off a process of learning that looked beyond the expected, usual and given. Participants began to delve into thoughts that they held, but had not effectively crystallised for themselves, to put together thoughts and ideas from the 'nearly know' phase of thinking to the 'now I know' phase and release ideas they held, but had not allowed to transmogrify. Expressing their thoughts seemed to be the first step to beginning to recognise ways of making changes and also 'realising that I can do something about it': 'What is articulated, strengthens itself, and what is not articulated tends towards non being' (Heaney, 1999).

Analysing their own practice had both supported and weakened their reliance on their own intuitive practice: supported it as these library staff members came to the project saying they were unhappy with the way they were currently doing things, and their research and analysis supported this unease; weakened it, because when they utilised research methods to develop their understanding of their practice, they knew they had to change that practice. One participant 'recognised that good intentions are not good enough'. Intuition and empathy were insufficient. The in-depth critical analysis of practice supported participants in developing their ability to see what was there, rather than what they hoped would be there.

In the initial stages of the project examination of their own practice had strengthened practitioners' confidence in their own identity and abilities, be that as parent or professional, and provided a sound basis from which to develop their critical awareness.

Understanding and Valuing the Perspectives of Others

Being confident enough in their own professional base to question it, and being confident enough in the relationship they had across boundaries to be able to question each other and learn from the questions they asked themselves and each other was at the heart of the project. Together participants explored preferred working practices and behaviours, and the reason why such practices may have arisen. Hearing about the work of others and engaging in understanding the role and perceptions of others was a vital element to beginning to value alternative perspectives:

> you know when we first met you about six months ago and I was
> saying, oh I know we shouldn't have these in the box. It's not
> right. I'm worried about it. I know it's not OK but it will probably
> have to stay because I don't know any other way and I haven't
> any money for change and you know that's all we can afford to
> buy. But now, six months down the line, yes we can, because we
> have listened to how others think and their ideas have become

just as important and let us see new ways of doing it. (Transcript from meetings)

Moving forward with these multiple perspectives in practice is a complex issue and gave rise to such questions as:

• How do we assign value to the multiplicity of ideas?
• Are our goals based on our personal understandings of society and if so, do we have to depersonalise them?
• When do we follow our own goals and when do we take the goals of others on board?
• Could/should pieces from each perspective be utilised to make a whole package or can one perspective become the overriding force behind practice?

The librarian in Project 3 described how the project became a turning point in her understanding and thinking about how parents perceive libraries. She had always recognised their need to feel comfortable in a library situation, but had not really understood the implications of this in 'real' terms. Recognising what 'comfortable' means for people, and working towards that, even though it may not be her own interpretation of feeling comfortable, became important to her. She established from her research that some parents, even young parents, had constructs of libraries that were at least 10 years out of date and based on very little experience, yet these constructs held strong sway in their reluctance to come to libraries. To encourage parents into libraries, she needed to take time finding out from parents themselves why they did not attend. This was an outwardly simple, but personally and professionally complex discovery for this librarian. It necessitated the development of understandings about the constructs of libraries by others, rather than those of librarians, and beginning to work out where these could meet and be supportive of each other:

... recognising that the complex and multifaceted nature of development means that specific expertise is only one of the contributions that a partner might make to the project. (Easen, 2000, p. 65)

Through her research, Tamanna (Project 2) saw within her family many different and often competing cultural perspectives of family life and childhood. She began to look at the impact different values were having on the development of her child, and took steps to reorientate family involvement to try and reduce confusion for her child.

During the RPP the recognition of the importance of multiple, changing perspectives, whilst unsettling, became the medium for the development of new aspects of practice. Participants appeared to gain confidence in the knowledge that they could co-construct understandings with others. Working and consulting with others gave these participants the impetus and 'the courage of our convictions' to try and put these changes into

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practice. It made them less afraid of failure within change, happier [in their understandings of situations] and more confident' (transcripts from meetings) that they could try again if things did not work out first time:

> I think probably for me, what the most important thing I've learnt is if it doesn't work, instead of getting really upset because we've put all this work and time in it – honestly, sometimes I just feel like crying. I just want to go home, sit and ... just let it go. But now I just take a deep breath and think right, because it's so important to get it right, you've just got to keep taking it all in what other people have said, and work with them. (Transcript from meetings)

Understanding the Impact of Practice upon Others

All participants in this project were working in close contact with others in situations that could affect the lives of others. As the project developed they became acutely aware of the wider impact of their work on others. For example, the nursery nurse in Project 5 recognised that taking a video (about families communicating with their babies through books) into a household could have much wider implications for families that she had originally envisaged. As both nursery nurses (Projects 5 and 6) developed their investigations they became increasingly mindful of how their work was based on a particular interpretation of child development and family organisation. By bringing their interpretation of early child development and parental involvement to parents they were asking families to delve not only into their current ideas about babies, communication and books, but often to connect with deep-seated experiences around reading, school and communication in their own lives and experiences of childhood.

As the librarians (Projects 3 and 4) reflected on their practice, they began to identify that their work touched on aspects of behaviour within families that may lie in experiences that people have chosen not to revisit. What seemed like a simple suggestion, such as bringing your child to the library to have fun, could be far more complex than they had ever envisaged and bring to the fore deep-rooted fears and prejudices held by some parents. This led project participants to look, in a systematic and critical manner, at their own particular cultural (either personal or professional) perspective and expectation of the way to be and do, and the implications of this on their practice with others.

Theme Two: thinking and working together across boundaries

What Does 'Working Together' Mean?

Whilst the rhetoric of 'working together' and 'working with other disciplines' is generally acknowledged as 'a good thing' the realities of practice highlight

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the complexities involved. Throughout the work with practitioners (and within this paper) the term 'multidisciplinary working' has been avoided. This is a phrase commonly used, but perhaps even more commonly understood without shared meaning. 'Multidisciplinary' along with words and phrases such as 'inclusion', 'quality' and 'excellence' come in the 'say it twice and you've got it' school of naming. Once named, we think we need no further explanation as we know what it is we are talking about. Yet naming is merely a convention, a shorthand identification; it does not define the properties of the thing named: 'So few people really look ... they identify' (Cartier-Bresson, 1998, p. 10). Language can:

> easily be used to substitute concept for precept, the name of the
> thing for the thing itself ... Recognition is the act of assigning a
> label to an object. Once assigned and classification has occurred,
> exploration ceases. (Eisner, 1988, p. 17)

The sharing of common terminology can build 'illusory consensus' (Edelman, 1964). Such consensus can fall apart when the symbols begin to be endowed with specific and different meanings and action by various parties (Easen, 2000). To avoid masking differences between the aims and practices of involved parties, and to achieve effective links between policy and practice we need to clarify our understandings and begin to develop joint understandings around the concept. This requires engaging participants in both concept analysis and development of more streamlined concepts to provide useful insights to advance practice (Walker & Avant, 1988). In this case, it could be argued that the label 'multidisciplinary' has been applied to the EAZ as a way of encouraging work across agency boundaries long before understandings about how the process of working together could be developed and clarified.

The RPP had not been designed as a project to develop 'multidisciplinary practice' and, as such, there were no preconceived notions of the shape of working together. As group participants began to clarify their own thoughts and understandings they began to be startled by the different ways other people within the group and within their research looked at similar tasks or difficulties. As they engaged in analysing concepts of self, profession and practice as part of the process of improving services with and for families, they began to articulate the need to work with others:

> I wonder if we have thought about how we can work together
> before. I mean truly work together, not just be doing the same
> project. I know the EAZ is a multidisciplinary thing, and we are
> all working for the same aims, but we have not been doing it
> together or even with the others have we? We just do the same
> kind of thing in our own way, with a slightly different slant on it.
> What we need to be doing is learning how to do it together,
> actually learning what it is together. (Transcript from meetings)

They came to the conclusion that their own work would be strengthened through active engagement with others. Project participants wanted to find out how the people they worked with, be that their own children and families in the case of parents, or the families and other professionals with whom they worked in the case of the library staff and nursery nurses, saw things:

> What we usually do is find out on a 'need to know basis'. If we
> are stuck we go and ask someone, otherwise we just plan it
> based on our own experience, and we are experienced people ...
> but now I think I need to know how other people see things
> before I decided on what we are doing. I want to involve them in
> planning for the thing because two heads are better than one. I
> know I have to work with people earlier ... see what they think
> and know. (Transcript from interviews)

The habit of planning something within your own practitioner group and then informing other parties and partners about what you plan to do is often called 'consultation'. In reality it can merely be the transmission of information about a *fait accompli*. Within the RRP group defining consultation became an important issue for the group. For them it had to involve talking, listening, thinking and learning together as a basis for planning policy, principles and practice. It was an interactive process where meanings were shaped together.

Why Work and Think Together?

Working together is explicitly designated as a key quality indicator for professional practice in Government initiatives such as Sure Start, Early Excellence Centres and EAZs. These projects have a policy objective to ensure that different professional strands that work with children and families are brought together. Their remit is that together and with the involvement of parents they will develop innovative service provision that will meet the needs of communities, combat social exclusion and raise educational standards. Beginning to break down barriers across professional bodies, and between professionals and parents, is a major policy initiative that many of these New Labour projects struggle towards.

As part of the evaluation process of the EAZ early years strategy the university evaluation team aimed to support the building of consultation and communication across the practitioner strands that were being corralled under the banner of the EAZ. Bringing together a range of practitioners and parents in the RPG provided a microcosm to explore why and how practitioners and parents might work together.

The participants in the RPG felt they would have 'done their job' far quicker on their own, but questioned the value and potential impact of what they may have produced. Working in multi-agency groups across professional boundaries and consulting with others had stimulated new ideas and helped to identify new ways of improving working practices. In a

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subsequent report (Pinkney & Zajac, undated) it was stated that one set of participants from the library service had found that the process of involving others in their thinking and planning had radically changed what they could offer as a service:

> We have moved from selecting good but average non-inclusive
> resources to an inclusive specialised sought-after collection that
> has involved children, parents, and a wide range of professionals
> and practitioners. (Pinkney & Zajac, undated, p. 18)

West & Poulton (1997, p. 15) argue that, whilst groups fall short on time-scales, 'research clearly indicates that groups make decisions of a better quality than the average quality of decisions made by individual members'. For some, this process of learning to learn together, of laying bare their own understandings and reasoning through research, discussion and critical analysis would now be part of their future working practice:

> Little did we know that our selected focus [for the RPP] ... would
> have such a positive effect within our own service. It has had an
> impact on our Early Years Strategy and has informed our choice
> of stock for the new Early Years Library Loan Service. (Transcript
> from meetings)

The notion of hypothesising over the nature of practice and the co-construction of practice became a major theme for debate within the group. They were learning to learn together. The importance lay not only in what they had learnt, but the method in which they had learnt it:

> We do need time to get together and talk about things with other
> people. If we have already decided on our own patch what to do,
> we are not going to change it just because someone tells us
> someone else is doing it differently – we end up doing things
> around each other and not supporting each other and just all
> doing our own thing. (Transcript from meetings)

Barriers to 'Working Together'

Throughout both the small project research conducted by group members and the discussions held during the meetings, participants identified numerous barriers to working together. There were, however, two key themes that emerged that persisted during the course of the project: the role of attachment and identity, and the role of management and organisational systems.

Professional attachment and professional and personal identity. Wilmot (1995) suggests that there is high degree of disciplinary attachment embodied in the formal codes, theories and values of professionals, and this can cause inertia in collaborative practice. Preconceived and entrenched views of identity and concerns about diluting this identity can be barriers to

effective interprofessional collaboration (Biggs, 1997). Indeed, Pirrie (1999), when working to establish multidisciplinary courses in higher education, stated that it was 'the tunnel vision associated with disciplinary attachment' that made her courses flounder. Too little account has been made of the professional cultures people find themselves in or the inherent scepticism of families of professional cultures, when multidisciplinary working is envisaged. As Easen (2000) points out, projects such as EAZs, by emphasising the high interdependence of agencies without taking account professional cultures resort to compromise between agencies and have difficulties in making innovative change.

Management. Managerial imperatives can mean activities that do not have immediate, tangible, easily measurable outcomes, for instance discussion, investigation, collaboration and research, are put on the back burner, while the real work of seeing clients gets done. This is an age-old dilemma that calls into play the tyrannies of time, tradition and the focus of measurement. The interplay between these can lead to practices remaining entrenched because the traditional organisational structure leaves no room for collaboration and learning together that can lead to innovative inter-agency practices.

The EAZ, whilst having an overall co-ordinator, encompasses many agencies and management systems. Participants in the RRP worked to separate line managers, each manager belonging to a different agency. Although working in and with the EAZ each agency has its own priorities, separate from those of the EAZ, and has its own set of working values, principles and procedures. Too often when setting up multidisciplinary working arenas, the 'whys' of working together get lost in these administrative/managerialist structures.

Within our small project, varying levels of management involvement and commitment either enhanced or restricted participation. For each group member to participate, the notion of development through multi-agency discussion and involvement had to be valued sufficiently by managers to ensure that time and space could be sanctioned. Where this did not happen, people were unable to participate in any meaningful way, if at all. In the case of the RPG this was particularly evident in the case of one set of practitioners who started the project, but were unable to complete. Nine participants completed the project with seven providing a written report of their project, its findings and their own learning from the findings.

When participants were asked about how they thought managers could be engaged in thinking together across their professional boundaries they said:

> That's simple, get them together in a project like this, and then they would see the benefits for themselves *[laughter]*. (Transcript from meetings)

We appear to have a paradox. On the one hand New Labour is offering us the rhetoric of 'joined up thinking', 'joined up working' and developing projects such as EAZs, Early Excellence Centres, Sure Start, etc., that have

at the heart of their inception different professionals working together. On the other hand, each professional body is accountable to a different managerial system that also has an agenda to work towards that will not necessarily include working with and developing understandings of others as a high priority. It would seem that the Government believes there are benefits to promoting such working practices, but are they addressing the hows? How can we develop structures that bring together differing service agendas at both local and national level? Are we developing structures that lead to genuine 'joined-up' managing and policy-making at national and local level, and ultimately provide opportunities for supportive joined-up thinking and learning at practitioner level? The balkanising of services goes beyond local managers and chief executives.

Summary

The process of reflecting and learning together in this reflective practice/action research project supported practitioners in thinking, learning about, designing, engaging in and changing elements of their practice according to the evidence they had gathered.

Engaging in working together became a complex mix of trying to understand both self and others, personally and professionally, and at all levels of the hierarchy. It entailed accepting that the complexities of human diversity and the importance of recognising diversity are a means to working with and including others. Constructed as it is from context, environment, professional and personal beliefs, experience and tradition, learning about working together is a process to be perpetually engaged in, rather than to have achieved. In the light of the fact that projects such as EAZs, Sure Start and Early Excellence Centre, to name but a few, require innovative thinking and working from multiple professional perspectives, it would seem germane to the task to draw out some pertinent questions that have arisen from the work of this project:

- Is the issue of what is really meant by 'working together', 'multidisciplinary' and 'inter-agency' practice being explored?
- Are practitioners supported in addressing entrenched behaviours; in looking at aspects of practice that might be difficult to address; in puncturing long held views?
- Is there a workplace ethos that values thinking and learning together as a precursor to successful 'doing'?
- Is time for facilitated collaborative reflection 'on' and 'in' practice being integrated into policy making and practice?
- Does the methodology of facilitated action research have a role to play in enabling policy changes and to turn thinking into understanding and action in a generalised manner, or will it stay as a micro/individualist approach.
- Do managerialist and administrative structures support a change and innovation culture?

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The success of any learning enterprise must also be based on how we use that learning in the future: 'Learning is not only the result of what we do, but also how we give meaning to what we have done' (Rowland, 1988, p. 63). To bring about structural change do we need to move from working with individuals to developing an overall approach with managers and policy makers? This project suggest that, whilst change has occurred for all, bigger changes and development may be possible where time it given for all, including managers, to engage in reflective research leading to action, otherwise it begs the question of how the methodology of action research integrates, in the wider sphere, what Somekh (2002, p. 92) termed 'the construction of knowledge with its enactment in practice'.

This project used action research in the micro-, rather than macro-arena. Participants working within such projects have limited access to making sweeping changes in policy and general practice. It began where it could, with practitioners, and ended with questions about how to support these practitioners in a wide approach to thinking, learning and acting together. How can pro-active problem-solving and embracing change be embedded into overall professional practice, rather than it remaining and individual task? How can such a research and development project be used to engage with the macro-situation?

The process of gaining confidence to open up and out, to bend, reshape and learn anew had been pivotal to development. Neglecting to recognise the need for ongoing collaboration or co-labouring/toiling together (Sumara & Luce-Kapler, 1993, p. 393) amongst those who influence policy and organisational structures can leave traditional boundary walls standing with practitioners trying to remove them stone by stone. The mechanism of moving policy and practice forward necessitates time for all to work together to find out how to really look, engage and collaborate in analysing 'taken for granted' concepts and practices, and to develop understandings of the changing nature of what is being done:

> looking is questioning, searching. Questioning the relationship of one thing to another; and enjoying. It needs concentration and it needs time ... under the pretext of searching nature, either in photography, drawing or painting, the problem is to rediscover intuitively the plastic laws of organisation. (Cartier-Bresson, 1998, p. 10)

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Notes

[1] *Early Excellence Centres.* The Early Excellence Centre programme is part of the Government's strategy for raising standards and integrating services for young children and families in England. It aims to develop, demonstrate and disseminate models of excellence in the delivery of centre-based integrated multi-agency services, which meet the needs of children and families, raise standards and achieve national impact. The Government is planning to have 100 centres established by March 2004.

[2] *Education Achievement Zones.* A programme launched in 1998 by the New Labour Government, whose aim was to drive up educational standards by uniting business, schools, local education authorities and parents, to enhance and develop education in areas of social deprivation.

[3] *Sure Start.* A government programme to support children, parents and communities through the integration of early education, childcare and health and family support services.

[4] *Born to Read.* A scheme that promotes the joy of reading and early communication through distributing free books to babies. It stresses the importance of parents communicating with their children.

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Starting where we can: using action research to develop inclusive practice

Starting where we can: using action research to develop inclusive practice

Commençant où nous pouvons: utilisation de la recherche active pour développer la pratique inclusive

Comenzando donde podemos: usando la investigación activa para desarrollar la práctica inclusiva

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This paper details how one city in the north-east of England set out to explore the concept of inclusion and to develop more inclusive early years and childcare services through the use of an action research/reflective practice approach with practitioners. It describes a local project, the Inclusive Practice Pilot Project (IPP), designed to develop more inclusive services for young children and children using out-of-school clubs. The paper outlines the progress of the project which used action research as a mechanism for developing thinking and understanding linked to practice change. It highlights both the catalysts for, and barriers to, the development of more inclusive practice. It concludes by suggesting that if early years and childcare services are to become more inclusive, then alongside technical and organizational change there needs to be more emphasis on supporting changes in attitudes, understandings and ways of thinking about practice.

Cet article expose en détail comment une ville dans le nord-est de l'Angleterre a entrepris de explorer le concept de l'inclusion et de développer avec les praticiens un service pré-escolaire et d' assistance à l'enfance plus inclusif à travers de l'utilisation d'une pratique qui utilise la recherche d'action/ recherche reflective. Un projet local est décrit, le Pilote Projet de Pratique Inclusive (IPP), conçu pour développer des services plus inclusives pour les enfants plus petits et les enfants qui utilisent dehors des clubs d'activités dehors de l'école. Cet essai décrit le progrès du projet qui a employé la recherche active comme mécanisme pour développer la pensée et la compréhension liées au changement de pratique. Il accentue non seulement les catalyseurs mais aussi les barrières au développement d'une pratique plus inclusive. On conclut en suggérant que si les services de la première enfance et d' assistance à l'enfance doivent devenir plus inclusifs alors qu'à côté du changement technique et organisationnel il faut mettre plus d'emphase en faveur du changement des attitudes, des ententes et des manières de penser autour la pratique.

Este ensayo detalla cómo una ciudad en el nordeste de Inglaterra se propuso a explorar el concepto de la inclusión y a desarrollar junto a los profesionales servicios más inclusivos para el cuidado de

niños y de pre-escolar a través del uso de una práctica basada sobre el método "investigación-acción/ práctica reflexiva". Describe un proyecto local, el Proyecto Piloto de la Práctica Inclusiva (IPP), diseñado para desarrollar servicios más inclusivos para los niños en general y los niños pequeños que usan clubs de actividades extraescolares. El papel perfila el progreso del proyecto en el que fue utilizada la investigación-acción como mecanismo para desarrollar el pensamiento y el entendimiento relacionados al cambio de práctica. Destaca tanto los catalizadores como las barreras al desarrollo de una práctica más inclusiva. Concluye sugiriendo que para que los servicios pre-escolares y de cuidado de niños lleguen a ser más inclusivos, entonces junto al cambio técnico y de organización se necesita poner más énfasis en el apoyo al cambio en las actitudes, el entendimiento y la manera de pensar sobre la práctica.

Background

In 1997 the UK Government produced the Green Paper *Excellence for all children* (DfEE, 1997). This, and the subsequent Action Plan for Special Educational Needs (SEN) (DfEE, 1998a), was fundamental to New Labour's inclusive educational policy. Within both documents, however, there is evidence of confusion as to what inclusive education might look like, and how it might be developed. The terms integration and inclusion are used interchangeably. This reflects the nature of their usage in the country at large, although increasingly differences between the two are being articulated within academic writings (Reiser & Mason, 1992; Oliver, 1996; Pijl *et al.*, 1997; Thomas, 1997). Although debate remains, integration is generally described as the provision of 'additional arrangements' to enable settings to admit certain children with particular needs but where the setting itself would remain essentially unchanged:

> Integration in its most negative connotation stands for integration by location, whilst providing a watered-down variant of the regular curriculum. (Pijl *et al.*, 1997, p. 2)

Inclusion is conceptualized as far more challenging than integration and is characterized by a more radical approach, going beyond the location of pupils in mainstream settings based on pupils' individual disabilities and towards developing

> a philosophy of acceptance and about providing a framework within which all children (regardless of the provenance of their difficulty at school) can be valued equally, treated with respect and provided with equal opportunities. (Thomas, 1997, p. 103)

Within the Green Paper (1997) and subsequent Action Plan for SEN (1998) the main thrust remains to reduce the numbers of children in segregated settings by slotting children into existing educational structures. Whilst mentioning the need to address attitudes and understandings there is little in the way of examining the moral, ethical and political themes that dominate our notions of education.

In the same year as the Action Plan for SEN (1998) the UK Government launched the National Childcare Strategy Green Paper *Meeting the childcare challenge* (DfEE, 1998b). The aim of this Strategy was to have a range of good quality, affordable childcare for children aged 0–14, and up to age 16 for children with special educational needs, in every neighbourhood by 2003. As part of the Strategy, Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships (EYDCPs) were established. EYDCPs have responsibility for planning, developing and implementing coordinated early

years and childcare services at a local level and ensuring quality across that provision. Within this remit is a specific responsibility to develop more inclusive provision for children with special educational needs in the range of early years services provided by local authorities and the private and voluntary sector.

Each year all EYDCPs submit development plans to the Department for Education and Skills. These must clearly outline progress and priorities and must describe action being taken to address the needs of children with special educational needs and their parents. Cook and Jones (unpublished 2001) examined the EYDCP Plans for 2000/01 covering the north of England, looking particularly at policy and provision concerning the inclusion of young children with special educational needs. Their review revealed that EYDCPs held many diverse understandings of the notions of integration and inclusion. Despite the overriding need to address thinking, understanding and attitudinal issues as the basis for developing inclusive practice (Howarth, 1987; Thomas, 1997; Vlachou, 1997; Alderson, 1999), the majority of EYDCPs were primarily addressing the organizational, technical and managerial demands of Government policy.

Developing inclusive early years services: one city's experience

In 1997 the early years services in the city of Newcastle upon Tyne initiated a survey to look at family perceptions of quality with regard to current provision for pre-school children with special educational needs. Parents and representatives from the Local Education Authority (LEA) used both individual and small group interview techniques to gather the views of 32 families with young children with special educational needs. Families were asked what it was they valued most about the services on offer to them, what they disliked most about them and what they would really want if they were given the proverbial magic wand. The responses to these questions raised some extremely complex issues. These issues included:

(1) What does/could good integrated/inclusive practice look like?
(2) Why is integration/inclusion taking place so unevenly across the city?
(3) What are the training and development needs of professionals in terms of disability awareness and pedagogy?
(4) Inclusion is a whole-community issue not just an EYDCP issue.

In 1998 the newly formed Newcastle upon Tyne EYDCP (which included representatives from local businesses, the LEA, parents, nursery and playgroup providers, childminders, crèche workers, toy libraries and those involved in professional development for practitioners) announced its intention to begin to address the issues raised by the parents' responses in the light of current policy and practice and with a view to future planning. This would involve developing thinking, understanding and practice across all sectors involved in childcare provision. It would involve addressing notions of inclusion within the organization, its management systems and the community. It would take account of human rights issues, national legislation and locally agreed principles, and build an ideology that valued the diversity of contributions to the human experience.

Developing notions of inclusion and inclusive practice

Booth *et al.* (1999) suggest that there are three dimensions pivotal to exploring policy and practice development: creating inclusive cultures, producing inclusive policies and evolving inclusive practice. The EYDCP recognized that before inclusive policies and practice could be implemented there was a need to create more inclusive cultures. The starting point for this was the need to explore and understand the concept of 'inclusion' as it related to current practice in the city. Within the Partnership and the wider community, the terms 'integration' and 'inclusion' were used almost interchangeably and left undefined. The EYDCP used the ideas of Professor J. Swain (Swain *et al.*, 2003) (see Box 1) as a basis for developing clearer definitions of integration and inclusion to help shape both understandings about practice and practice itself.

The following were then identified as necessary prerequisites to developing more inclusive thinking and practice:

● an understanding of what 'inclusion' may mean for individuals, settings and service users;
● an understanding of the need for and willingness to change; and
● support for self-reflection and change.

The EYDCP engaged consultants to develop this work and to produce a 'Charter for Inclusion' for the city.

Developing a Charter through consultation

Consultants were employed to begin to collate agreed understandings for developing inclusive practice across the city's early years and out-of-school club providers.

Box 1

Integration (a state of being)	Inclusion (a process)
What matters is where young people receive services	What matters is the process of developing mainstream settings—their curriculum, organization, attitudes, etc. to reduce the difficulties in learning and participation experienced by pupils
Integration is seen as a matter of changing buildings, bringing in people who 'know' and/or extending the skills of professionals	Inclusion begins with commitment to the development of fully accessible services
Integration is seen as acceptance and tolerance of young disabled people	Inclusion is valuing and celebrating what disabled people offer to society based on the positive valuing and celebration of difference
Integration is underpinned by dominant values of what is normal in terms of the person and the services	Inclusion in services recognizes the diversity of need including race, gender and disability
Integration can be delivered Inclusion must be struggled for	Integration is professional-led Inclusion is partnership-led through negotiation

These agreed understandings would become the basis of a 'Charter for Inclusion' to be used as a framework for coordinated development. The findings of the consultation were presented to the Partnership in 2001 (Hope *et al.*, 2001). This work indicated that across managers of services, providers and users of services, i.e. families and children, there were vast differences in understanding inclusion and creating inclusive practice:

> The Partnership should know what it wants to do with the Charter for Inclusion— [it should] not just be that they want to write one—because everybody is aware they don't really understand what inclusion is. Parent/provider: from discussion group. (Hope *et al.*, 2001, p. 10)

The consultants concluded that there had been no clear investment in inclusion and the city was not yet at the point where a Charter would be useful. They recommended that the next step should be to undertake a pilot project where the issues raised by their work could be utilized as a catalyst for the development of inclusive practice. They drew up five key principles for inclusive practice that could be used to support a pilot project (see Box 2).

The Inclusive Pilot Project

The Inclusive Pilot Project (IPP) had three dimensions; one dimension concerned understanding the notion of inclusion; the second concerned making this work in practice and the third was concerned with knowing about what enabled inclusive practice to take place. The aims of the project were twofold. Firstly, to attempt to identify what enabled participants to change their own thinking, the thinking within their setting and ultimately translate this into practice. Secondly, to offer, in Winter's words,

> an account of a specific situation that gets sufficiently close to its underlying structure to enable others to see potential similarities with other situations. (Winter, 2000, p. 144).

Box 2

Key Principles for Inclusive Practice
1. We value all people in society.
2. We will provide quality services for all children.
3. We recognise the right of children to be involved in all decisions that affect them.
4. We recognise the role of families and carers to be decision makers with children.
5. We will not limit our expectations.
We recognise the need to identify and remove all barriers to inclusion which relate to: ● the environment;   ● people and   ● our organisation.
EYDCP September 2001

Action research was chosen as the key vehicle for this as it involves participants in thinking about and enquiring into their own practice, in conjunction with others and with a commitment to change:

> [it is research] conceived and carried out mainly by 'insiders', by those engaged in and committed to the situation, not by outsiders, not by 'spectators' (although outside 'facilitators' may also, indeed, have rather an important role to play). (Winter, 2002, p. 27)

Project outline

All early years and childcare settings in the city were invited to participate in the pilot project. The only criterion for acceptance on the project was that they had to be committed to developing more inclusive practice in their setting. In the light of the work of Boushel *et al.* (1992), who had encountered professional and organizational inertia and resistance to their integration project, it was decided to start with participants who were both open to inclusion per se and to developing their own understandings of inclusion. Thomas *et al.* (1998) also suggest that to enable a project to move forward it needs to begin by seeking out

> the healthy parts of the system ... [people who] are sympathetic to the change being proposed. (p. 195)

Nine settings representing toy libraries, childminders, out-of-school clubs, private and voluntary nurseries, playgroups, parent and toddler groups and LEA nursery provision, participated in the project. Two staff members from each setting acted as representatives at project meetings.

The project was coordinated and evaluated by a small team from Northumbria University led by a senior lecturer in early years and special educational needs. The university team met fortnightly with a group of professionals and practitioners who had volunteered to be mentors for the pilot settings. This group consisted of a speech and language therapist, an early years consultant, a community development worker, an educational psychologist, a pre-school teacher, an EYDCP development officer, a coordinator of a childminders' network and two inclusion workers. As such the mentors were already known to and working with their chosen setting. The mentors' role was not to direct the settings but to support the process of critical reflection into practice. The university team acted as 'outside facilitators' (Winter, 2002, p. 27) for the mentors and in turn the mentors became facilitators for the settings.

Mentors visited their setting between each fortnightly mentors' meeting and worked with their setting in the light of the work done at that meeting. The format of the meetings varied according to the stage of the project and the needs of the mentors and settings. The coordinating team, mentors and practitioners from the pilot settings also met together on three occasions, once at the beginning of the project, once mid-way and again at the end.

The project proceeded in phases, each phase building on knowledge gained from the previous phase.

Phases of the project

(1) Working with mentors and pilot settings to develop understandings of:
    (a) inclusive issues and
    (b) supportive reflective practice as a change process and evaluation tool.
(2) Engaging mentors and pilot projects in identifying where they are now, what works well and illuminating possible barriers to be overcome/challenges to be addressed.
(3) Identifying indicators of development.
(4) Establishing setting-based research projects into inclusive practice.
(5) Analysing and reviewing the progress of the work in the light of local indicators and the Key Principles for Practice followed by identifying new areas for development.
(6) Reporting. Dissemination and implementation of findings.

The pilot began in September 2001 and ran until March 2002.

Methodology

The aim of the evaluation was both to 'account for' the effectiveness of the project and also to 'make an account of' its processes of improvement. A key challenge was to create a process that would enable participants to make meaningful insights into notions of inclusion leading to changes in practice. Participants therefore needed to be able to recognize the reality of their own starting positions in terms of their thinking, behaviour and attitudes as well as taking into consideration technical, administrative and practical issues. A social transformation perspective that supports concerted efforts towards systemic change seemed to be appropriate for a project that aimed to develop inclusive practice against a historical background of integration and segregation. Action research was chosen because it has, as one of its basic ideas, the need to create

> a constant interplay between our principles—hearing a wider range of voices, social justice, greater humanity, greater reverences for our precarious earth, along with desires for more technical efficiency, etc—and our practice. (Noffke, 2002, p. 22)

Getting beneath the surface to the personal feelings and experiences of participants is a sensitive, difficult and demanding task. It necessitates delving deeper into what Clough and Barton (1995) call the 'taken for granted'. It needs to:

> both speak to those who 'take for granted' in terms they would recognise and at the same time challenge their orientation by holding up those terms to the light of radical questioning. (p. 146)

Allan (1999) identified the messy nature of this type of process and recognized the need for continual reflection and development:

> If we begin by looking into our beliefs, assumptions and practices, the ethical project of inclusion will, by design, be messy, unpredictable and far-reaching, and it will differ from setting to setting, albeit informed by a similar long view of a never ending project. (Allan, 1999, p. 382)

Elliott's revised version of the Lewin/Kemmis action research model (1991, p. 71) was helpful in enabling participants to see the project as an ongoing process rather than as a task with a single trajectory. It allowed for ideas within the individual projects to shift when returned to in the light of the analysis of interventions. It also reiterated the project expectation that settings would make practical, positive changes in their work:

> What is specific to 'action research' as a form of inquiry is that it uses the experience of being committed to trying to improve some practical aspect of a practical situation as a means for developing our understanding of it. (Winter, 2002, p. 27)

The following questions were used to help explore practice:

- What does inclusion mean for each person in terms of their philosophy of practice?
- What does inclusion mean for each setting as expressed in their policies on inclusion (or policy on special educational needs)?
- How is this translated into practice?
- Is there evidence of change in practice?
- What are the barriers to developing inclusive practice?

Practical activities, games and scenarios were employed to help mentors and participants from settings delve beneath the common rhetoric of inclusion to gain a new perspective on what inclusion is, or could be, in their setting.

Participants also worked collaboratively on developing a list of activities that they considered to be inclusive (see Box 3).

The purpose of this list was not just to identify what participants thought inclusive practice might look like but also to capture the discussion around the development of the list. This discussion would help understand how settings began to think about addressing issues of inclusion from different perspectives and how they planned to translate the insights that emerged into practice.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted at the beginning and end of the project, with both mentors and representatives from the settings, to gather emerging understandings of the nature of inclusive practice. In the final interview participants had their own statements, comments and thoughts returned to them for discussion (a process

Box 3

A sample of 'Examples of Inclusive Practice'
• everyone, all staff, parents, families and children are involved in identifying what makes you feel included;
• people working together to develop real understandings and making changes/improvements to practice;
• being welcoming—having positive attitudes to difference and being willing to find out more about different cultures, communities and ways of being;
• starting with the positives;
• being open to new ways of thinking, finding new ways, being flexible, being a problem solver;
• seeing each child as an individual but not as 'the same'.

termed, for the purposes of this project, 'reflect and review'). Their reflections on these previous statements were then collected as data.

Group discussions using 'reflect and review' took place during the fortnightly meetings. Amended statements were examined for indicators of changes in thinking and practice, what had caused these changes and any new themes noted. Fieldnotes were kept of all meetings throughout the project by the research assistant from the university team.

Using a variety of methods enabled 'Findings' to be gathered over the lifetime of the project and changes to be tracked. All the data sets were analysed using a grounded theory-based approach (Glaser & Straus, 1967). A coding system was used to collate and synthesize the data under appropriate thematic headings. Theories of understanding were derived inductively from the data.

Understandings of inclusion in practice

Using alternative perspectives to think about practice within their own context was a key element to enabling participants to see beyond the technical constraints of inclusion to understanding that much of what excluded children was socially constructed. The IPP offered access not to a set of givens but a way of thinking within a set of principles. By the end of the project, most participants identified the struggle towards understanding as a key element in enabling them to realize changes in practice. The following quotes are representative of comments made by a number of participants from settings during the final interviews.

> Staff feel the most important aspect of their involvement in the project has been their reflection on the principles of inclusion. (Interviewee A)

One participant, on realizing the fundamental differences between integration and inclusion, saw the need to reassess practice in terms of enabling a child to have access to the whole playgroup experience:

> We realised that although we had accepted him into our playgroup, he was only in the building and now we had to work on helping him be part of what goes on here. That is the difference really, the difference I now see between integration and inclusion. (Interviewee B)

Another described how the work of defining inclusion in her setting had affected their understanding of who needed to make changes in order for the setting to become more inclusive:

> I think we had been fairly at an integration level [as opposed to inclusion]. Now it's not just the case of people coming into the nursery and fitting in with our routine ... it's about us changing too ... (Interviewee C)

It was suggested that the key element of developing inclusive practice was not in identifying what practitioners do, or could do, but in asking themselves *why* they do it that way:

> if this is the way we do it, *why* do we do it this way and *what is the effect* of that? (Interviewee A)

Participants in the project were beginning to think about their practice in layers. One layer was their own personal thinking but other layers included the thinking behind inclusive policy in their setting, the perceptions of actual practice by those who used their facilities and the assumptions behind policy at local, national and international level.

The criteria for 'quality' judgements, for deciding that certain practices were important factors/indicators/elements of inclusion came via the process of checking their practice against their own indicators of inclusion and the Key Principles for Inclusive Practice (see Box 2). As inclusion involves addressing deep-seated notions of morality, fairness and equality, there is no straightforward set of technical questions that can be asked and the case proven. That is not to say that there was no 'right and wrong' but that judgements about practice were complex, and would always be so.

Participants suggested that in the past inclusion had been a set of 'things to check' such as access to buildings, and

> ensuring that children with special educational needs are given a place, an opportunity
> to be in the same building as the others. (Interviewee B)

Whilst participants had created a list of what inclusive practice might look like (see Box 3), they recognized the fluidity of this list. It could be different according to workplace situations and current understandings, and would alter over time. If others were to develop this work they might use the same way of finding out but arrive at very different identifiers and indicators. It was the process of developing the list, rather than the actuality of having a given set of statements, which gave notions of inclusion practical application. Working towards developing a framework for thinking about practice rather than being given a set of tools by which to make inclusion happen had been seen as an unattractive option by some participants at the beginning of the project. They thought it might be an

> airy-fairy exercise far removed from doing it [inclusion] and so a waste of time. (Inter-
> viewee D)

About two months into the project one exasperated participant vocalized what was perhaps in the minds of many others:

> If you just tell me what to do, I will do it, I'm getting lost in all this thinking. (Fieldnotes)

In her work with schools and school systems seeking change in response to inclusion, Ware (2001) reported a similar experience. When asked what an inclusive system would look like, she replied that it would be different from setting to setting. Those who needed a formula would then:

> walk away, visibly dissatisfied, but for those willing to imagine otherwise and to
> move beyond the mythology of special education, the challenge becomes an awesome
> unravelling of the inherent exclusion prevalent in schools. (p. 381)

The 'thinking opportunity' had been the key to seeing opportunities for a change in practice. That change was not always a practical change, but more likely to be a change from being '*problem identifiers*' to '*can do*' practitioners. Being given the support to unravel some of the issues raised, in manageable and practical steps, had given participants confidence to deliver change:

Everyone should have the opportunity to attend something like this—it's made us all think and then feel confident about trying to do something about it—knowing we can do something here. (Fieldnotes)

Barriers to the development of inclusive thinking

The difficulties with developing inclusive practice, whether real or perceived, are well rehearsed and often entrenched as 'given' and unmoveable. To begin by concentrating on these before we had developed a culture of critical, reflective thinking that might be able to challenge understandings was unhelpful, given the project's aims. To neglect to identify barriers that needed to be addressed would be to offer an unrealistic version of reality. Four main barriers were identified from data gathered during IPP, as described below.

Participation and representation

Questions were raised about who could, would and should participate in projects such as the IPP and how we might reach those who currently do not participate, either because they don't want inclusion, or because they think they already provide it.

It was suggested that the non-representation of those who might be able to affect organizational change exacerbated difficulties in resolving constraints at an organizational level. The participation of policy-makers and administrators would have been helpful in beginning to unpick a number of particularly thorny aspects of practice such as:

- admissions policies that lacked flexibility in both timing and numbers;
- methods for measuring success based on a child's academic achievement;
- inflexible working time arrangements; and
- individual working arrangements leading to isolation (collated from fieldnotes and interview data).

Whilst there, in essence, to protect the rights of children and families, structures and rules were sometimes the source of barriers to enabling children to be included. It proved difficult at the time of the project, and to this day, to attract policy-makers, managers and administrators to the project.

A second issue was that families who use the services were invited to participate only in the setting-based research project and not at the overall project planning level. The rationale for this was that, at this point in time, the project needed to enable participants from settings to see for themselves how they could begin to address, with confidence, making changes in the light of the perspectives of families rather than a total reliance on their own professional judgement. This was, for many, a big step to take. The IPP was a way of dipping toes into complexity; moving participants from the support of the professional known to embracing a different set of 'knowns', i.e. the knowledge of families and children. As the project progressed, participants themselves identified this as a necessary part of their research. Almost all the research projects conducted in the settings involved eliciting parental

perspectives but only practitioners from the out-of-school club, who worked with older children, felt sufficiently confident to begin to work with children as part of the research process.

Illusory understanding

A factor contributing to the lack of participation of policy-makers and managers in the project was that inclusion had become a 'taken-for-granted' concept which people believed they understood and were doing already. One practitioner made this point about her own experience within the IPP:

> I think it can be harder to think of addressing something that you think is good than sorting out an obvious problem. We thought we were doing all right and so thinking about it wasn't a real priority ... but we didn't know what we didn't know! (Interviewee E)

Training and development opportunities currently on offer

With a few notable exceptions, training and development tended to focus on technical/ procedural skills (e.g. learning about the features of autism) and meeting managerial and administrative requirements, rather than developing critical, reflective thinking. Whilst in-service training retains a focus on one-off technical presentations of the causes and characteristics of special educational needs, opportunities to engender positive attitudes towards working with children with special educational needs remain limited. The IPP was identified as a rare opportunity to develop knowledge of the philosophies and complexities that lie behind a policy.

Participants also suggested that the lack of frequent, regular support from staff with experience in both inclusion and knowledge of their setting meant that the more complex issues around attitudes and understandings were neglected.

Access and funding

There were difficulties in obtaining funding, particularly short-term funding, to support environmental changes, staffing issues and knowledge building. Access to training opportunities could be difficult, especially for those who work non-standard hours, and funding for extra working hours for training was rare.

Necessities for development and change

This small project does not lay claim to the identification of a set of practices that would lead to the inclusion of all children in early years and childcare settings. Whilst there can be no template that offers inclusive practice to suit all contexts, certain practices within the IPP were identified as the elements that enabled and supported changes in practice. Each setting was different, but as Winter (2000) states:

> It is at the level of structure that a number of situations may be similar, whereas at the level of, let us say, 'surface detail' each situation is uniquely different. (p. 144)

Evidence from this project would suggest that the 'structural' elements that enabled settings to create understandings for more inclusive cultures were: access to supported reflective practice over time; the broad framework for reflective practice and action research; examining the prevailing understandings and abilities of the setting as opposed to starting from an external imposed agenda for change; building the confidence of practitioners; having an expectation that something can and will be achieved and the requirement to articulate to others both the outcome of their own research and its impact on practice.

The challenge was to identify the procedural steps that enabled mentors and staff in settings to think about and question their understandings and practices, and lead them to seeing the need to engage with a range of perspectives including those of families and children with whom they worked. Practitioners needed to see the 'need' to develop practice before they could put their energies into doing so. The project had to tread carefully with them, however, to enable them to move forward with confidence, to take manageable, positive steps. This meant starting from where they were, not where those wishing for more inclusive practice might have wanted them to be. For some practitioners the IPP was too difficult and practice remains relatively unaffected. For others the very nature of their thinking has been changed. The work of the project has migrated into the daily practice of their settings in terms of how they approach thinking about, engaging with and providing for all the families and children who come to their settings.

This paper suggests that the use of critical, reflective approaches may support the development of practice that is more inclusive. Whilst evidence of the success or otherwise of this type of approach has not been collected systematically, Sebba and Sachdev (1997) in their report *What works in inclusive education* suggest that there has been a positive effect on inclusive practices where schools have been using an approach that addresses understandings, attitudes and perceptions.

As we begin the twenty-first century, inclusive practice in educational, early years and childcare settings still tends to be seen as a manifestation of achieving observable types of practice rather than developing an ongoing process to eradicate socially constructed barriers that exclude. This project highlights the need for a refocus of training for practitioners to enable them confidently to approach the needs of all children rather than a select band and to identify their own role, in conjunction with others, in constructing opportunities for all.

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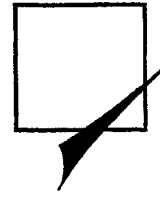
Collaborative Action Research within Developmental Evaluation

Learning to See or the Road to Myopia?

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This article investigates the use of collaborative action research in both
the development and evaluation of a project designed to develop inclusive
practice in Early Years and childcare settings. The purpose of the evaluation
was to ascertain how practitioners understand the term 'inclusion', how
those understandings were translated into practice and how changes in
that practice might be conceptualized and carried out. The article explores
the use of facilitated collaborative action research as a core element in
developmental evaluation. Reflecting on other approaches such as theory
of change, it considers whether the use of action research supported the
critical examination and development of a project, or whether, by being so
similar in design, it constricted the evaluation in terms of reliability of data,
accountability and providing a framework for planning and development.

KEYWORDS: change; constructing realities; inclusion; learning;
participatory action research

Introduction

The Inclusive Practice Pilot (IPP) project was commissioned in the UK by
Newcastle upon Tyne Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership
(EYDCP) to look at how inclusive practice might be developed across Early
Years and childcare settings within the city. An evaluation was proposed to
provide the funders (EYDCP) with information about the necessary conditions
for developing inclusive practice to help bridge what was seen as a policy/practice
divide. The policy was to be inclusive in the sense that inclusion is legislated for as
a human rights issue. It is underpinned by a number of initiatives and treaties such
as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Office of the United
Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1989), the UNESCO Salamanca
Statement (1994) and the Special Educational Needs Disability Discrimination
Act (2001), and it is a requirement for all Early Years and childcare providers

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(DfEE, 1997, 1998). However, in practice, the EYDCP recognized that exclusion still occurred. The purpose of this evaluation was to document how inclusion was conceptualized and practised across Newcastle and establish what might allow settings to develop and/or change their thinking and behaviour to enable more inclusive practice. The evaluation aimed to support knowledge building about inclusive practice through providing an account of the specific situation that would, in Winter's words, get 'sufficiently close to its underlying structure to enable others to see potential similarities with other situations' (2000: 1).

A form of evaluation was needed, therefore, that would explore below surface representations of inclusive practice and tease out principles to be further developed in Early Years settings across the city. It had to investigate how inclusive practice could be characterized, to identify what enabled participants to be aware of and even change their own thinking, the thinking within their setting, and ultimately translate changes in thinking into changes in practice.

Action research is a form of inquiry that uses the experience of trying to improve some practical aspect of a real situation as a means for developing our understanding of it (Winter, 2002: 27). It seemed, therefore, to be an appropriate approach to use in an evaluation that included facilitating the development of philosophies of practice, being a practical conduit for change in practice and recording that which enabled progress and change in practice to take place. It seemed that the closeness between the agreed principles and methods of action research and the needs of this evaluation would, when working together, provide the 'right tool for the job'. However, the question remained as to whether, by using participatory inquiry methods to both develop and evaluate, there was a danger of losing critical perspective. This article articulates that debate. It begins by giving a brief overview of the IPP project and the fundamental principles of evaluation and action research as defined and agreed with the funders of the project. It considers how inclusion and progress towards inclusion were conceptualized and articulated, how a range of perspectives and interpretations were gathered across the multiple realities and meanings that existed across a variety of Early Years settings, and how this way of gathering and using information contributed to the evaluation.

The Inclusive Practice Pilot Project

The Inclusive Practice Pilot (IPP) project was part of a series of initiatives conducted by the EYDCP to develop inclusive practice in Early Years services in Newcastle upon Tyne in the UK. The project was coordinated and evaluated by a small team from Northumbria University led by the author, a senior lecturer in Early Years and special educational needs. My own involvement in action research spans the use of action research for individual learning and development (my own), action research for service development (as head of a preschool service for children with special educational needs), and action research as part of externally funded evaluation projects.

The project ran for nine months. All Early Years and childcare settings in the city were invited to participate. The only criterion for acceptance on the project was that settings had to be committed to actively developing more inclusive practice. Broadly speaking, therefore, the IPP project worked with a group of participants committed to trying to improve some practical aspect of their situation as inclusive practitioners. Nine settings, of the following types, participated in the study: toy libraries, childminders, out of school clubs, private and voluntary nurseries, playgroups, parent and toddler groups and LEA nursery provision. Two staff members from each setting acted as representatives at project meetings.

The university team met fortnightly with a group of professionals and practitioners who had volunteered to be mentors for the pilot settings. Each mentor worked with an Early Years setting with which they were already familiar and where they had regular working links. Their role was to support the process of setting-based thinking, putting research into practice and providing data for the evaluation. They visited their setting between each fortnightly mentors' meeting and worked with that setting using the content of the meeting as a starting point. All participants, the coordinating team, mentors and practitioners from the settings met together on three occasions, once at the beginning of the project, once midway and again at the end. The university team acted as 'outside facilitators' for the mentors, and the mentors became facilitators for the settings by acting as a conduit with the university team.

The project proceeded in phases, each phase building on knowledge gained from the previous phase in a manner adapted from Kemmis and McTaggert's (1988) notion of an action research spiral and Elliott's (1991) revised notion of Kurt Lewin's action research model. The first phase concerned building understandings of inclusion and identifying contextual indicators of inclusion pertinent to the setting. The second phase involved participants conducting research with their setting both to identify notions of inclusion held by other people (e.g. staff and parents) and to check whether the indicators were helpful pointers for development. The third phase involved identifying action to be taken and reflected upon in the light of understandings developed during the project.

The Basis of the Evaluation

While evaluation can be characterized as a relatively new discipline, it has experienced tremendous interest, growth and development in recent years. However, many programme managers, when they call for evaluations to be undertaken, have limited experience, knowledge and understanding of evaluation. They tend to regard it as an audit-like accountability measure. Evaluation is expected to be a process of counting and checking up, of measuring value against an externally imposed accountability structure. Cook (1997) suggests that historically evaluation has been seen as a quantitative procedure consisting of the 'task of generating unbiased, precise estimates of the causal consequences of programmes of their major constituent parts' (Cook, 1997: 32).

Evaluation, however, has many variables that encompass a broad set of understandings and purposes identifiable in the ongoing differentiation of

evaluative procedures, for example, 'bureaucratic' evaluation (MacDonald, 1977), 'constructivist evaluation' (Guba, 1990), 'reflective evaluation' (Eisner, 1991), 'evaluation for social justice' (House, 1990), 'responsive evaluation' (Stake, 1997) and 'realist evaluation' (Kazi, 2003; Pawson and Tilley, 1997) to name but a few. It is not surprising then that when the evaluators and project/programme managers met together to begin to plan the IPP project, they had a variety of expectations of evaluation and its purpose. The first step was to identify the purpose of *this* evaluation.

Through discussions with the managers and funders at the outset of the project it was agreed that the project would be formative and would include:

- helping to establish and maintain communication amongst project participants by supporting 'enabling conversations' about programme quality and direction;
- helping to clarify appropriate indicators and criteria to account for success;
- assisting project managers and participants to adopt a (self-)critical perspective on the project and its activities; and
- providing opportunities for project members to develop evaluation skills incorporating a strong stakeholder focus.

As evaluators of the IPP project, the university team was mindful of the guiding principles of the evaluation as agreed between the evaluators and funders. In particular they paid attention to the requirement to support 'enabling conversations' about programme quality and direction amongst participants and to assist participants to take a reflective stance towards the project and its activities. This had to be weighed against a less well-articulated need of officers and managers (and to a certain degree project participants) for a set of recognizable specific understandings and actions that would become identifiers for/indicators of 'inclusive practice'. A balance needed to be struck between the search for concrete outcomes and a recognizable order, and the opportunity to raise the profile of the process as a meaningful happening in itself, without fixing it as a particular product. There was some tension between identifying certain practices as being inclusive and retaining an open and ongoing dialogue with participants about what currently characterized inclusive practice that would leave the door open to the possibility of new characterizations in the future. It was important to devise methods that would document and capture the insider experience and interpretations of that experience but at the same time be responsive to external evaluation requirements and understandings. Choosing a collaborative action research approach as the basis of the evaluation was a way of providing a framework for a process of thinking and action that could continue beyond the life of the project.

The evaluation of the IPP project was to be more than the use of applied social science methods to inform the project about whether it was meeting a given set of targets. It sought to get below externally predetermined representations of quality, efficiency and conceptualizations of practice. It was therefore a broader understanding of evaluation, based on Chelimsky and Shadish's (1997) three

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perspectives on evaluation – evaluation for development, evaluation for knowledge building and evaluation for accountability – that was chosen to frame the approach used by the IPP project. It would support participants in the project in taking a new perspective on their work and in uncovering new and unrecognized knowing, characterized by Eraut (2000: 256; after Polyani, 1967) as tacit knowledge, that is, knowledge that we have but cannot easily describe or explain. Marra (2004: 269) notes that the bulk of evaluation literature finds participatory design and interactive processes of data collection and analysis to be the most effective ways to socialize tacit knowledge. Socialization, according to Marra (2004), means that the participants 'not only come to understand each others' definition of shared situations but also agree on a common identification and "justified true belief" about how to act in that situation' (Marra, 2004: 269). She goes on to say that

> . . . evaluation-based information is more than the specific information required immediately by each individual. The sharing of the extra information between individuals promotes the sharing of individual tacit knowledge and members share overlapping information. (Marra, 2004: 279)

This joint understanding could then be used to develop indicators for evaluating practice and as the basis for transforming practice. It would also lend itself to theory and knowledge building, particularly in the area of conceptualizing practice.

Methods

The evaluation of this project gathered documentation of action research under-taken by participants and discussions about the meaning of that research at fortnightly meetings. As they struggled to deconstruct preconceived notions of inclusion, the attempts of participants to make practice meaningful to terms of new understandings and to build new ways of doing were collected and collated. Documentation such as diary or field notes kept by participants as part of their own reflective practice and research was also brought to the table at the meetings to be discussed and key issues identified. Key themes emanating from all documentations were then returned to the participants to form part of further discussion at the fortnightly meetings. Semi-structured interviews took place before the project started, during the project and at the end of the project and were recorded by the university team. In this way fundamental 'whys' of practice from a number of perspectives were gathered together without reducing the complexity of diverse understandings by trying to make them fit into a particular reporting structure.

On the basis of these documentations the group (participants and evaluators) focused on identifying indicators of inclusive practice gathered from the range of Early Years and childcare settings, to help map programme development. The EYDCP already had a set of Five Key Principles for Inclusive Practice which underpinned the work of the project (Box 1).

Box 1. Key Principles for Inclusive Practice

1. We value all people in society.
2. We will provide quality services for all children.
3. We recognize the right of children to be involved in all decisions that affect them.
4. We recognize the role of families and carers to be decision makers with children.
5. We will not limit our expectations.
 	
We recognize the need to identify and remove all barriers to inclusion which relate to:
 	
  • the environment;
  • people; and
  • our organization.

Source: EYDCP September 2001.

The engagement of those who struggled daily to balance actual working lives with perceptions of 'perfect' practice occasioned by external requirements produced a set of active, needs-led indicators (Box 2) that also seemed to fit within the Five Key Principles for Inclusive Practice outlined in Box 1.

These indicators were a synthesis of the combined 'knowing' of what was considered worthwhile by participants, critiqued by themselves in collaboration with others. Collected from within practice, they were expected to provide direction for future programme planning.

Box 2. Examples of Indicators of Inclusive Practice, IPP Project, 2002

• Happy children, parents and practitioners • Families are involved in dialogue, planning and decision making • Children are involved in dialogue, planning and decision making • 'Being made welcome' is paramount when engaging with children and families • Inclusion is actively discussed and all perspectives are carefully thought about • There is a positive attitude towards problem solving • Confident staff who make parents feel confident about leaving their children • Practitioners/professionals and managers ask questions about *what* they are doing and *why* they are doing it • Access for all really means for all • The environment is included in planning • There is visual evidence of respect for other cultures and difference • Staff organization is carefully considered on a regular basis • Good work is being recognized and celebrated • Active thinking is leading to changes and evolving practice • Policy and practice are interlinked • New knowledge is always being sought and utilized

Analysing the data to uncover key themes was achieved through a modified Delphi technique. Ziglio (1996) describes the Delphi method as a structured process for collecting and distilling knowledge from a group of experts by means of a series of questionnaires interspersed with controlled opinion feedback. In this case the experts were the participants from Early Years settings and questionnaires were replaced with meetings, groups and individual interviews. The feedback from each session was either given informally as a group topic for discussion or, halfway through project, 'thoughts so far' were written into a 'snapshot' report and delivered to participants with a questionnaire feedback option or the option to meet and discuss with the researcher. Both methods were used by participants.

Ultimately the project participants identified that it was not the use of indicators, but the interpretation of the indicators, that was the key to the development of inclusive practice and the aspect of the project that really needed to be evaluated was the process, not the outcome. Some participants suggested that target or checklist methods for measuring success in inclusive practice could, in essence, be seen as part of the problem rather than the solution. For instance:

> The Government think that more is better [more children in mainstream schools] but more children in mainstream settings is not necessarily a good thing at this point if they are just put in and nothing is done to change practice to accommodate them. But at this stage of the game we might need to really think about whether practices we have in our settings actually exclude children from taking part, so more is not better, more is worse for those children, but they get seen as success stories. (Interview c)

Methodological Dilemmas and Choices Made

Setting an evaluation so strongly within an 'insider participatory' paradigm raised specific tensions. Externally imposed measures of quality have traditionally been held up as more objective and hence reliable indicators and measures. Scriven (1997) argues that, while there is a strong attack on distancing, distancing and 'objectivity' remain the correct ideals for the external evaluator. He states that: 'the closer we come to them [distance and objectivity], the more accurate our conclusions are likely to be, other things being equal'.

Validity is considered to be higher when the evaluator is distanced from project participants and not drawn into the complexity of their discussions, perceptions and formulations about what constitutes programme quality. If the evaluator remains aloof and maintains a given criterion for evaluative critique, their judgements are characterized as being unbiased and more valid.

The strength of performance management type approaches to evaluation, which emphasize predetermined programme outcomes as measures of quality, tend to lie in providing 'important short-term, quick turn-around information for tracking progress against stated goals' (Blalock, 1999: 142). The absence, however, of what Blalock (1999: 117) calls 'a commitment to collect information about why and how those results occurred' renders the performance management model less useful as a basis for programme development. Interpreting 'worthwhileness'–

what fundamentally enables a programme to function, what gives it meaning and ultimately why it is initiated – is a complex and often contentious issue within the evaluation task that is often left unaddressed and ill-defined. Despite continued debate, measurable outcomes that search for stable, objective truths continue to remain the 'gold standard' for many.

In the case of the IPP evaluation, while the questions 'what' and 'how many' were part of the evaluators' armoury, the question 'why' took on particular significance within the enquiry. As one participant in the project stated, the key element of developing inclusive practice lay not in identifying what practitioners do, or could do, but in finding out: 'if this is the way we do it, *why* do we do it this way and what is the effect of that?' (Fieldnotes).

The 'why' became a crucial aspect of the process of developing inclusive practice and the answers to the 'why' questions in terms of what made practice worthwhile were seen as being a starting point for action planning for change.

Suggesting that evaluators and participants might work together in making decisions about 'worthwhileness', good practice and quality, using an insider-researcher/evaluator approach, requires a paradigmatic shift from an approach aimed at proving something against a given standard. It means moving towards accepting that there is no homogeneous standard of value to unite all parties. The identification of meaningful processes that 'make sense of what is going on' (Dahlberg et al., 1999: 107) are seen, at best, as the icing on the cake which can be disregarded or abandoned according to taste or in the interest of efficient use of evaluative resources. As Somekh (2002: 89) points out, however, there are multiple realities, not just one: 'There is more than one construction of the world, which means that there is more than one way of deciding upon what "counts" as knowledge.'

Blumer also warned that trying to catch the interpretative process by remaining aloof as a so-called 'objective' observer and refusing to take the role of the acting unit is 'to risk the worst kind of subjectivism – the objective observer is likely to fill in the process of interpretation with his own surmises in place of catching the process as it occurs in the experience of the acting unit which uses it' (Blumer, 1969: 86).

Externally imposed systems and measures are not necessarily sufficiently finely tuned to enable an evaluator to get to the heart of what gives a project or programme meaning. Claims for accountability that use predetermined preconceptions and standardized external measures are not always helpful in making judgements or in capturing the fine threads that weave together the relative merits of programmes and practices. They can be a blunt tool that reduces the 'knowing' to the measure of particular observable or reproducible variables. They may involve identifying certain predetermined features on a basis that can be quantified and pass over some of the more esoteric aspects of a project that may be difficult to quantify but have a major impact on programme development. Deciding on representations of quality without inquiring into the complex features of everyday practice can be seen as tantamount, in traditional scientific terms, to making decisions without knowing all the 'facts'. The 'facts' in qualitative

evaluations may be far from tangible and observable but have equally important effects on the way organizations develop practice programmes.

A tight framework of externally imposed, measurable imperatives may not allow for the construction of concepts of quality that capture the changing and multiple perspectives of programme development over time. They may bias the evaluation towards gathering information about and reinforcing the 'known', rather than the 'yet to be understood'. This was particularly pertinent in the IPP project, which invested energy engaging participants in collaborative reflection on topics to support emerging knowledge and to find appropriate indicators of development. The long arm of history does, however, still reach deep into the mindsets of both organizations and practitioners. The question 'how can this be a good evaluation if we haven't counted anything?' is, in my experience, one that is still asked, or at least is implicit. The next question tends to be 'how can this be reliable evidence if it is given by the participants?' My question would be, 'how could evidence be reliable if participants are not involved?' 'Knowledge constructed without the active participation of practitioners can only be partial knowledge' (Somekh, 2002: 90). Practitioners do know, but they sometimes need some help to develop that knowing into something they can then recognize and act upon.

If externally derived indicators are used for describing what makes effective programme development, an error in judgement may already have been made in terms of what constitutes quality, good practice and worthwhile development. Evaluators and programme policy makers then invest in that error, with evaluators meticulously monitoring the process of practitioners learning how to pursue a course with a great deal of exactitude but with little worth. Eisner (1998) suggests that the features of the work itself should guide the criteria applied to judge it. In addition, if standards/targets and/or indicators are not contextually appropriate, evaluators may find themselves in the position of identifying what programmes have not done, even though the programme has taken an appropriate course of action under prevailing circumstances, rather than identifying positive characteristics in a programme's development and practice. The subject of the evaluation may then be incorrectly judged as failing, with all the damaging consequences of such a diagnosis.

If quality is characterized as a socially constructed notion of what merits being termed worthwhile, it is affected by context, history and perspective. How then, could a construction of worthwhileness and quality that includes being meaningful to programme development be recognized through checking against a set of externally imposed criteria? A more informed recognition of worthwhileness is found through a synthesis of both internal and external understandings that are made meaningful in context. If the notion of 'worthwhileness' was to underpin the basis of judgements about quality there was a need to acknowledge and address the multiple perspectives and realities present amongst the range of practitioners and their settings. Removing the multiple perspectives that come together in complex social organizations, you remove a large part of the contextual element that affects behaviour and decision making in policy and practice. As Somekh

(2002) suggests, researchers who are not part of the action context have a tendency to oversimplify their analysis and assume a simplistic cause–effect relationship between phenomena and events.

Theory-Based Evaluation and the IPP Project

The approach taken to the evaluation of the IPP project drew on aspects of two theory-based evaluation approaches that have come to the fore in recent years: theories of change (ToC) and realistic evaluation. ToC is a term developed through the work of the Aspen Institute Roundtable initiative as a way of describing 'the set of assumptions that explain both the mini-steps that lead to the long term goal of interest and the connections between program activities and outcomes that occur at each step of the way' (Weiss, 1995).

ToC employs the integration of process and outcomes in evaluation, asking what happened, how and why that happened, with a focus on developing new theories for action. It 'delineates the pathway of an initiative by making explicit both the outcomes of an initiative (early, intermediate, and longer term) and the action strategies that will lead to the achievement of these outcomes' (Connell and Klem, 2000: 94). Connell and Kubisch (1998) suggest that a good ToC design begins with programme staff identifying the outcomes they hope the programme might achieve. In this way it can

1. sharpen the planning and implementation of an initiative;
2. facilitate the measurements and data collection as part of the process so avoiding the risk that evaluation will be driven by the tools rather than vice versa;
3. through articulating the theory of change at the outset of the programme, strengthen the scientific case for attributing subsequent change to the activities included in the initiative.

This articulation of the ToC framework led to a number of questions in relation to the IPP evaluation about when and how a theory of change approach might be developed. If programme staff are asked to identify outcomes at the outset, whilst this does support the development of contextually appropriate, understandable and achievable measures/indicators for change, how do participants see beyond what is already there to what might be possible – and whose views about the future prospects should they build on? A strength of the ToC approach appeared to be in the detailed analysis of the programme in order to identify what it is about the current programme that could lead to development. This was an aspect heavily drawn on by the IPP project. However, where this occurred in the evaluation framework was problematic. The question for the IPP evaluation was 'how could participants plan for change and understand what might enable change to happen before the process of developing understandings about what things might look like had taken place?' While it is suggested that the ToC approach 'forces program staff to examine their own beliefs about what works, for whom

and under what circumstances' (Kagan, 1998: 115), they give little indication as to how this might happen.

Blamey and Mackenzie (2002), when using a ToC approach to evaluation of two Scottish National Health Demonstration Projects, also raised this issue. They noted that ToC tended to lead to a very linear approach to planning and evaluation which may miss or mask some of the very complex interactions within and between projects. It may be unable to uncover unexpected outcomes or synergies and the skills and procedures for monitoring are not sufficiently sensitive or responsive to the complexity that exists (Blamey and Mackenzie, 2002: 14). What a 'final, usable version' of ToC might look like was lacking. While ToC led directly to improved planning they questioned whether the approach could really get to the heart of '*which aspects* of a complex programme of activities work with *which sub-groups* of the population and in *what circumstances*' [italics in the original] (Blamey and Mackenzie, 2002: 15).

The second approach drawn on by the IPP project is known as realistic evaluation. This places a particular focus on generating theories underlying programme design through detailed analysis, in order to identify what the programme is about and what might produce change. This detailed analysis is then used to identify activities/measures that might produce change and 'which individuals, subgroups and locations might benefit most readily from the program, and which social-cultural resources are necessary to sustain the change' (Pawson and Tilley, 1997: 85).

Pawson and Tilley (1997) claim that those who follow a realistic evaluation approach are 'whole-heartedly *pluralist* when it comes to the choice of method' and attempt to carefully tailor the method to the form of hypothesis being used. The notion of 'what works for whom' is strong in this type of evaluative approach and therefore attractive to an evaluation process such as the IPP that sought to match method to form and build on diversity.

The principles behind both these approaches informed the design of the evaluation of the IPP project.

The Role of an Action Research Approach in Evaluation

Discussion abounds about key principles of action research, how it is distinguishable from other forms of enquiry and what its role and function might be. For the purposes of the IPP project, action research was conceptualized as being aligned with processes of research that strive to represent all voices. The value of action research lies in its intent to develop collaborative thinking on and through action. It engages participants in creating better understandings of what they are doing now, why they are doing it now, whether it matches their understandings of what should be done, whether there are other ways of doing this that meet their understandings and what is needed to create change.

Elliott, a member of the team involved in the Humanities Curriculum Project (Stenhouse, 1975, 1980), suggested that action research consists of: 'review, diagnosis, planning, implementation, monitoring effects [and] provides the necessary

link between self-evaluation and professional development' (Elliott, 1982: ii, 1). For Elliott, then, action research, grounded firmly in the personal, was part of self-evaluation, the fundamental aim being to improve practice rather than to produce knowledge. 'Within this form of educational inquiry theoretical abstraction plays a subordinate role in the development of a practical wisdom grounded in reflective experiences of concrete cases' (Elliott, 1991: 53).

As already outlined, the IPP evaluation had, as part of its remit, the intent to engage in theoretical construction, both about the nature of inclusive practice and about the use of action research as an evaluation and development tool. The conceptualization of the action research approach in this case went beyond Elliot's (1991) view just quoted. It included the need to create what Whitehead (1989) termed a living educational theory about what gives action 'validity' in context and how certain principles might inform the practice of others. Questions about what is worth doing, what is 'good practice' and what is worth recording are inextricably linked.

Central to the action research process is that it separates rhetoric from well-rehearsed notions of practice. Thus action research can be used to puncture and critique the general worldview of practitioners. It can disturb their current satisfaction with what they have, uncover tacit knowledge and understandings and support participants in moving beyond the familiar to learn something new from their own work: 'action research . . . involves questioning the meaning of data so that participants can go beyond the already "expert" understandings which defined their starting points' (Winter, 2002: 36–8).

Participants in the IPP project had volunteered to participate in the project because they were committed to 'inclusion'. For many, however, whilst inclusion had been a constant companion it was a fairly vague notion. Being 'committed to inclusion' had not necessarily engendered in-depth thinking with a resultant reshaping of both general and specific practices involving children with different needs. Inclusion was fraternized with: understood in terms of its intentions without embedded ways of working being confronted and critiqued in terms of philosophies, beliefs and understandings. It had invoked what Roland Barthes, the French philosopher, linguist and literary critic, termed 'docile interest' (1982). The degree of interest invested in inclusive practice was never, to borrow from Barthes's terminology, a 'delight or : . . pain' for practitioners (1982: 28). Oliver (1996) argues that for inclusion to take place it must be struggled for.

When talking about photography and its effect on thinking Barthes used the term 'studium' to describe the average effect or 'docile interest' that is engendered when looking at certain photographs. These photographs have meaning for him as he is familiar with what they portray and with their message but he only feels 'a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment . . . but without special acuity' (p. 26). They do not inspire him to question or think in depth about the photographs. He accepts their generality as it is. Barthes continues by reflecting on other photographs that affect his world in a more active sense. When he looks at these photographs, there is something about a particular aspect of the photograph that

has the ability to 'prick, disturb and wound' the comfortable studium. This aspect he termed the 'punctum point'. This seems to reflect a key role of the action research process in evaluation. It provided a prism rather than a mere window through which participants looked at their own work to find meaning, develop thinking and articulate new knowledge. Action research shifted the discussions held amongst practitioners from description to reflection, then from reflection to critical self-reflection and to begin to yield the details that constituted the very raw elements of their work. It enabled a number of participants in the IPP project to find their 'punctum point' in the picture of inclusive practice: the point that had meaning for them and that would both inform and effect change. The punctum point may be different for each participant, but serves the same purpose. It moves thinking beyond the chimera or gloss of accepted ways of being and behaving to identifying contradictions and areas of rub within that practice. Action research had a facility to support participants to have that 'bolt from the blue' realization. It enabled them to get below their own rhetoric, and that of others, to identify actual practice and the meaning behind practice rather than theories of idealized practice.

> We realized that although we had accepted him into our playgroup, [the basis on which they had previously defined themselves as being inclusive] he was only in the building and now we had to work on helping him be part of what goes on here. That is the difference really, the difference I now see between integration and inclusion. (Interview b)

> I think we had been fairly at an integration level [as opposed to inclusion]. Now it's not just the case of people coming into the nursery and fitting in with our routine ... it's about us changing too. (Interview d)

Both these participants had a realization that their current practice, whilst meeting certain administrative conditions for inclusion, was not really fulfilling a central tenet of inclusion, that is, that a child should be an active participant. This led them to think not just about current practice, but how they could develop future practice and, more importantly, continue to critique any future practice they may develop.

Deconstructing both embedded and consigned notions of inclusion was not easy and involved some participants in wrestling with standards (their own as well as externally imposed standards), targets and organizational dictates that had been accepted as, and broadly translated into, guidelines for practice. Participants suggested that in the past inclusion had been a set of 'things to check', such as access to buildings, and 'ensuring that children with special educational needs are given a place, an opportunity to be in the same building as the others' (Interview b).

For many within the project, the process of learning to reflect was a key element in the change process. 'Staff feel the most important aspect of their involvement in the project has been their reflection on the principles of inclusion' (Interview a). Action research goes beyond critical reflection; it has a commitment to instigating action based on that reflection. In the IPP project, action plans for addressing the 'rub' within practice varied across settings but insider imperative to create steps for change was an important aspect of the project:

Everyone should have the opportunity to attend something like this – it's made us all think and then feel confident about trying to do something about it – knowing we can do something here. (Researcher fieldnote)

Outcomes of the Evaluation

Whilst one outcome of the IPP project was a set of indicators for inclusive practice, a key outcome was the recognition that it was the way of working towards those indicators that was crucial for development. Participants suggested that the activity of engaging in critical reflection on and in practice – not the identification of a given set of standards – provided a basis for active change (see Box 3).

Box 3. Key Elements to Developing Practice

The following were identified by participants as key elements that enabled them to develop new understandings about inclusion in theory and practice.

- Access to frequent/regular support for both settings and mentors
- Starting from where you are – being realistic
- Theory and practice linked to your own setting
- An expectation of action and reporting on that action
- Pertinent and helpful activities to develop thinking
- A framework for thinking as well as doing
- Providing new perspectives of the familiar
- Opportunities to hear and learn about the work of others
- The process of having to identify *why* your good practice is good
- Opportunities for focused discussion that made you investigate thinking alongside practice
- Opportunities for focused collaboration both across settings and within settings

A second outcome of the evaluation was the intention to develop a training programme for Early Years practitioners in relation to working with children with special educational needs. This would not be a didactic programme on the features of inclusive practice as these would differ across organizations and change over time. This training would be about developing the persona of an action researcher with inclusion as the focus. Participants in the IPP project, as part of defining what has supported their thinking and development, suggested that the future learning would need to include the elements listed in Box 4. It would aim to provide the opportunity for participants to address the 'studium' and hopefully to be hit with a 'punctum point' or two! The punctum point, where tacit knowledge, known knowledge, seeing and learning come together was seen by participants as a key facilitator of change.

Box 4. Key Elements for Supporting Development and Change

Participants suggested that the following would be necessary to continue the development of inclusive practice across the Early Years sector.

- Current participants should have continued opportunities to get together and discuss practice, but not on such a regular or intense basis.
- New participants should have the opportunity to investigate their own practice in a similar manner to the current project.They suggested the development of a course that would encapsulate the key elements of the IPP project (see Box 3).
- Participants on the course should represent and collaborate with all staff in their setting and a representative from all settings should eventually be *required* to attend the course.
- Mentors were a necessary element in successful change.
- Policy makers, managers and practitioners should attend training.
- Training should be made accessible to all, including parents.

Discussion

How is practice characterized as worthwhile? What should count as evidence of worthwhileness? Who decides? How can knowing facilitate action? These questions lie at the heart of the debate about what evaluation is for and what it does, and hence they lie at the heart of this article. If the overall aim of evaluation is, as Weiss (1995) suggests, to assist people and organizations to improve their plans, policies and practices on behalf of citizens, then it is important that real understandings of practice and philosophies of practice are the foundations for planning. Differences in perspective and emphasis across stakeholders in projects need to be teased out and engaged with. Not to do so would result in building on a chimera of understanding that could not offer firm foundations for development.

The use of collaborative action research offered a means of getting close to finding out what might produce new understandings and how that might link to a change in practice. The strength of action research lay in making meaning of current activities to inform future change practice, an aspect of evaluation that has been cited by Connell and Kubisch (1998) as the 'hardest part of the theory articulation process'. When Weiss (1995) hypothesized that a key reason complex programmes are difficult to evaluate is that the assumptions that inspire them are poorly articulated and that stakeholders of complex community initiatives typically are unclear about how the process will unfold, she stated that one key reason for this was that evaluations paid insufficient attention to early and mid-term needs in order for a long-term goal to be reached. A strength of the IPP evaluation was its emphasis on early understandings in the first stages of the evaluation design. Using collaborative reflections to begin to break down generally held beliefs and assumptions and build on tacit knowledge through articulation of issues drew in the multiple perspectives endemic in such a project.

It brought together understandings, development and implementation in practice. As Somekh points out, action research takes account of the need to integrate the construction of knowledge with its enactment in practice: 'The epistemology which underpins action research methodology is distinctive in that it rejects the notion that knowledge can be de-contextualised from its context of practice' (Somekh, 2002: 90).

In terms of strategic development based on learning from the evaluation, action research may have much to offer in terms of improving understanding, development and change in practice and, perhaps more importantly, finding out how change might occur in the future. However, it was weaker in the area of organizational planning. As used in this evaluation, action research was unlikely to produce a blueprint set of change pathways, but as suggested by the discussion throughout the article, that was not deemed appropriate for this type of evaluation. Change that came from this evaluation tended to be a pragmatic response to reflection and sudden realization (the 'punctum point' effect) engendered through the practical processes of the evaluation. An emphasis on strategic planning for change embedded at the beginning of a project, informed by ToC approaches, could be helpful in strengthening the strategic planning process within evaluations using an action research approach, and could perhaps go some way to engaging with policy makers. One notable omission from the participant list in this project was the managers and policy makers. Although invited and encouraged to participate, they felt unable to do so. This may have long-term implications for strategic planning from the learning acquired in this project. This is something to learn from and take forward to future evaluations using this approach.

Concluding Thoughts

It would appear then, given the purpose of this evaluation as articulated at the outset, that the use of collaborative action research was a reasonable response to the needs of the participants and their managers/local policy makers. It enabled the evaluator to work with participants to delve deep into their understandings of inclusion and begin to tease out the complex and temporal meanings that form the basis of current practice. It evoked an essence of 'knowing' where multiple perspectives told different stories and supported participant enquiry into what they personally meant by inclusion and what others might mean by the use of the same word. The use of self-evaluation and self-reflection as critique to put common understandings to the test in a collaborative forum supported the unearthing and synthesis of complex and varied meanings from a range of perspectives. The multiple perspectives gathered through the discussions and research, plus the varied opportunities for both data collection and analysis, gave strength, meaning and – to borrow a word from a more positivist paradigm – validity to the project. The work has resonance with similar work undertaken by Marra (2004) where the process of building evaluative knowledge was seen to take place only when organizational members reflected on their actions.

The use of action research also strengthened two other key dimensions of this evaluation. First, it provided a workable base for development that delved

beneath the general representations of practice (studium) that can be mistaken for 'knowing'. Second, the 'hows' of practice change have been addressed through the direct linking of critique and change embedded in the evaluation design at the start of the project. Whilst it is not always comfortable for participants to have their understandings and beliefs questioned in this way, not to do so would have left the project with an unstable basis for development. This process of discussion and supportive critique offered a dynamic learning process that worked towards renewed understandings and continued change.

Searching for one simple truth, capturing one objective measure of worth-whileness, one way forward, could have left the picture whole, its fabric undisturbed and the basis of its development unknown. Perhaps then, drawing on the essence of a number of theories of evaluation and through using a number of methods to develop, research and evaluate the project, action research was a reasonable tool for the job; it was a reasonable evaluation; it evoked some 'truths' and offered ways to further development.

> We often photograph events that are called 'news' but some tell the news step by step in detail as if making an accountant's statement. Such news and magazine photographers, unfortunately, approach an event in a most pedestrian way. It's like reading the details of the Battle of Waterloo by some historian: so many guns were there, so many men were wounded – you read the account as if it were an itemisation ... Life isn't made of stories that you cut into slices like an apple pie. There's no standard way of approaching a story. We have to evoke a situation, a truth. This is the poetry of life's reality. (Cartier-Bresson, 1989: 425)

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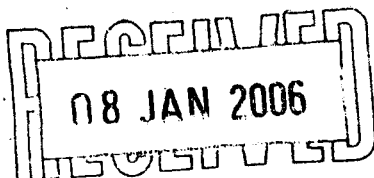
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Signed: ...Sally French...(co-author) ...27\12\06(date)

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(Please use one form per co-author per publication)

Section A

Name of candidate:

Name of co-author:

Full bibliographical details of the publication (including authors):

Cook, T & Swain, J.(2001)

Parents' Perspectives on the Closure of a Special School: towards inclusion in partnership. **Educational Review** Vol 53 (2) pp191-198

Section B

DECLARATION BY CANDIDATE (delete as appropriate)

I declare that my contribution to the above publication was as:

        (i)   **principal author**

        (ii)   **joint author**

        (iii)   **minor contributing author**

Signed: ....(candidate) ...11/05/06....(date)

Section C

STATEMENT BY CO-AUTHOR (delete as appropriate)

Either   (i)   **I agree with the above declaration by the candidate**

or   (ii)   ~~I do not agree with the above declaration by the candidate for the following reason(s):~~

Signed: ....(co-author) ...12/1/07...(date)
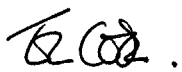
Declarations

Regulation 3.5

Declaration

None of the publications submitted for this award have been submitted by this candidate for a research degree from this or any other institution

Declaration

I declare that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for any other award and that it is all my own work.

Name: Tina Cook

Signature:

Date: 7th November 2007