



**Leading and Managing Collaborative Practice:
the Research
ESRC Seminar 3 Proceedings**

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Joan Forbes (Editor)



School of Education
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LEADING AND MANAGING COLLABORATIVE PRACTICE:

THE RESEARCH

ESRC SEMINAR 3 PROCEEDINGS

Research Paper Editor:

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University of Aberdeen

The integration of services in schools – how education should integrate with other services provided to children and families – is now a topical issue. To explore what children's services integration involves, a group of researchers from the universities of Aberdeen, Birmingham and Ulster, which was successful in 2005 in winning an award in the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Seminar Series competition, has organised a programme of research seminars.

In January 2007, the third of these seminars was held at the University of Birmingham, with the title *Leading and managing collaborative practice: the research*. The Birmingham seminar built on some of the shared understandings from the first two seminars concerning children's services policy and practice. The seminar explored notions of leadership and management as constructed and conceptualised within disciplines which collaborate in multidisciplinary work. It specifically examined discourses of power as they played out in professional status, gender and ethnicity within and across disciplines and how these subvert collaboration, co-learning and joint problem solving, leadership and management. A central focus in discussion concerned the management of change in professional groups' and agencies' moves from mono-professional and single subject disciplinary to collaborative practice.

The aim of this seminar series is to bring together practitioners, researchers, and policy makers from the various disciplines that inform policy and practice in education, health and social care, together with representatives of voluntary agencies,

Research directions in leading and managing collaborative practice

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Learning leadership in multiagency work for integrating services into schools

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professional associations and service users, to explore a number of important questions for practitioners and professional groups arising from current moves towards children's services integration. Seminar themes include:

- the changed policy goals and mechanisms for policy-making and delivery;
- new 'bottom up' relationships with service users and user communities;
- issues of governance and the organization of associative and communal relations in schools;
- the operation of new versions of networked professionalism; and
- practitioners' constructions of new professional identities.

The objectives of this seminar series are to:

- examine the tensions and complementarities in the discourses of inter-professional and interagency working which are drawn upon by the different disciplines and professional groups in relation to the idea of service integration;
- explore other 'global' solutions that might inform education and children's services interprofessional and interagency policy and practice within the UK nations;
- identify opportunities to build collaborative research networks and openings for synergies in theoretical scholarship and empirical research.

The papers from the third seminar in the series are now brought together in this collection, *Leading and managing collaborative practice: the research*, published in the *Research Papers* series of the University of Aberdeen, School of Education. In keeping with the seminars, this collection is intended for practitioners, managers and leaders, academics and policy-makers from the fields of education, health and social care.

It is intended that this publication, and the series of research papers linked to the *Service integration in schools: research and policy discourses, practices and future prospects* seminars series, will present thoughtful and challenging analyses of recent developments in children's services policy across the UK nations, critiquing fundamental issues of children's services restructuring and interprofessional relationships.

Key debates from seminars one and two in the series are published in previous papers in the *Research Papers* series:

The Research and Policy Discourses of Service Integration, Interprofessional and Interagency Working: ESRC Seminar 1 Proceedings (2006). Aberdeen: University of Aberdeen.

How Service Integration is Operating in Practice in the Scotland, Northern Ireland and England and Wales Policy Contexts: ESRC Seminar 2 Proceedings (2007). Aberdeen: University of Aberdeen.

Copies of both reports are available from the seminar series administrator at the School of Education, University of Aberdeen: jennifer.boyd@abdn.ac.uk (£8.00 per copy).

RESEARCH DIRECTIONS IN LEADING AND MANAGING COLLABORATIVE PRACTICE

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This paper draws together the main themes of the third seminar of the ESRC seminar series: *Service integration in schools: Research and policy discourses, practices and future prospects*, held in the University of Birmingham in January 2007. The seminar explored issues of leadership in multiagency work involved in integrating services into schools. Sociocultural activity theory informs directly the two research projects reported in the papers from Anne Edwards, and Paul Warmington and colleagues. The third paper from David Brown is an empirical view of multiagency working in children's services from the perspective of a director of children's services of an English midlands metropolitan borough. The fourth paper from David Hartley is a critical reflection on the discourses of policies about multiagency working in education.

This seminar is orientated by Vygotsky's and Engeström's perspective of learning, and learning in work organisations, in order to interpret and understand the integration of services into schools. The particular learning theory we draw on is sociocultural (cultural historical) activity theory.

Standard theories of learning are focused on processes where a subject (traditionally an individual, more recently possibly also an organisation) acquires some identifiable knowledge or skills in such a way that a corresponding, relatively lasting change in behaviour of the subject may be observed. It is a self-evident presupposition that the knowledge or skill to be acquired is itself stable and reasonably well defined. There is a competent 'teacher' who knows what is to be learned. The problem is that much of the most intriguing kinds of learning in work organisations violates this presupposition (Engeström, 2001, p.137).

Integrating services into schools is

a learning challenge that cannot be met by training individual practitioners and parents to adopt some new skills and knowledge. The issue at stake [is] organisational, not resolvable by a sum total of separate individuals (Engeström, 2001, p.140).

Sociocultural activity theory comes from two strands of research on learning. Sociocultural (cultural historical) theory has a North American strand which understands learning as personal and cognitive. The other, activity theory, is a Russian, Marxist strand which understands learning as social, cultural and collective (Engeström, Engeström, & Vahaaho, 1999; Edwards, 2005). Vygotsky believed both the cognitive and cultural to be involved and his enterprise was to reveal rules for a relationship between these two forms of learning. He posited that 'mediation' between the external and the internal brought about internalisation of new knowledge, meaning making and learning. The fundamental notion of learning is being able to think or do something that was previously beyond one's capability and do this learning in a social context with another or others. Vygotsky called the set of interactions in this space for learning the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

Engeström defines learning as being able to interpret our worlds in increasingly complex ways and being able to respond to these interpretations. He defines this as 'expansive learning' and it is the driver for personal and organisational change. He sees activity systems as collective and orientated towards a problem, a 'focus of learning' (an object) and mediated by tools and signs (Engeström *et al.*, 1999). The elements of human activity are the subject (learners), the object, and the mediating artifacts, the community, rules and division of labour.

Developmental Work Research (DWR) is an interventionist methodology for applying activity theory to develop expansive learning in workplace settings. The DWR workshops or sessions have a preferred format to present the conceptual tools of activity

theory to participants for them to develop a shared conceptualisation of the problem/ learning focus, and the shared language of activity theory in order to work towards possible solutions. Presenting both the conceptual tools and the problem/learning focus is at the centre of Vygotskian notions of learning, and known as 'double stimulation' (Engeström, 2007). The creation of new knowledge is realised in new cultural forms which are themselves new tools and rules of development (Daniels, 2004). Kerosuo and Engeström (2003) construed their research on organisational learning with multiagency health workers, as the collective process of making new tools to work together more effectively in meeting patients' needs.

Schools could be called 'well bounded work units' that are identifiable as *communities of practice* or *functional systems*, that could be conceived as a *centre of co-ordination of learning activity*. They contrast with the multiorganisational field of children's services and medical care which are much less bounded work units (Engeström, 2001). Practitioners often consider that learning at work and in organisations concerns assuming the collectively-based routines, that is the forms, rules, procedures, conventions, strategies around which organisations are constructed (Levitt & March, 1988). From the perspective of sociocultural activity theory, formation of routines occurs *horizontally* across and between providers of different provisions and *vertically* between management and managed within the organisational system. Boundaries are created by practitioners' routines. Boundary zones are learning spaces created across activity systems for boundary-crossing.

Boundary-crossing is a practice orientated by the idea that there is a ZPD that facilitates learning in the workplace just as there is in classrooms, the primary difference being that it is far less clearly demarcated in the workplace. It is difficult to focus on learning in workplaces and interventions through developmental work research are usually done outside work time in contexts conducive to reflection and discussion. Boundary-crossing is characterised by a process of horizontal development, which means that learners have to develop the capability to mediate between different forms of expertise and the

demands of different contexts, rather than bringing their accumulated vertical knowledge and skill to bear on the new situation. In this sense boundary-crossing involves negotiating different ZPDs.

Boundary-crossing is evidenced by concept (re)formation in specially directed research intervention sessions where new learning needs to occur across the various activity systems involved. The everyday practices and routines of practitioners are challenged and disrupted by working in multiagency activity systems.

A key concept of horizontal learning / boundary-crossing is that everyday practices are re-conceptualised in terms of 'scientific' concepts within a framework of activity theory. That is, familiar routines which have become problematic are focused on and transformed to more abstract conceptualisations; for example understanding incompatible timetabling as a contradiction of rules across different activity systems. Traditionally, development of incremental professional expertise and management of interorganisational relationships is described as *vertical learning*. A re-conceptualisation of professional learning is *horizontal learning* across networks of activity systems (sectors of health care).

The notion of distributed expertise means that the focus of learning draws on various specialist knowledges in the activity system. However, claims to ownership and sharing of specialist knowledge may be problematic, evidenced for example in resistance and differences in values and ethics. Distributed expertise may also be construed as contributing as a motivated member of the activity system. Engaging effective distributed expertise may become a learning focus, in order to create new tools for shared language and ways of working.

Knotworking describes the fleeting linkages that may be found in dislocated and shifting networks (Engeström *et al.*, 1999; Edwards & D'Arcy, 2004). For example, certain professionals may be required to work with a child for a time to meet a specific need,

such as arranging respite care, and then cease to work together and reconfigure in different networks. Knotworking describes interweaving of a range of practitioners across activity systems to create a unique activity system to resolve particular needs. Leadership of knotworking practices, for example, may be agreed to be with the key worker, rather than a more formally 'fixed' person.

Co-configuration is a concept from a study of organisational learning in manufacturing contexts (Victor & Boynton, 1998). In Victor and Boynton's analysis, co-configuration emerges in organisational learning after a phase of 'mass customisation' production. They define co-configuration as production of intelligent, flexible services with a high degree of client participation. It is possible to draw some parallels with multiagency work for integrating services into schools, where services and schools need to include the voices of parents and children in the design of client needs led services.

In the first presentation under the title, 'Developing collaborative practice', Professor Anne Edwards from the University of Oxford, outlined the project, the National Evaluation of the Children's Fund (NECF). The Children's Fund (CF) tackles social exclusion through initiatives on early intervention, flexible service provision, better co-ordination of provision, recognition of the complex needs of children and young people and supporting pathways of participation in society. The Children's Fund (2000-2008) focuses on children aged 5-13, and their families. Its aim is 'Partnership and Participation for Prevention' and it set up 149 partnerships across all 150 local authorities in England and Wales. They build on local strengths to meet local needs and act as a catalyst for changing ways of working. The CF partnerships are set up to deliver government policy and exist alongside local authority structures. Partnership boards work on strategy: for example, they may target particular groups or neighbourhoods. The Boards commission services to work with children and young people, such as breakfast clubs and mentoring.

This presentation focused on reporting the case studies of 16 partnership boards and how the NECF used activity theory as a lens to examine partnership working. The

presentation introduced key concepts of activity theory used to interpret the learning that was being done on the multiagency strategic partnership boards. Specific questions on the functioning of the Boards were:

- What were they working on and how did they do it?
- What were the rules - how strong was the historical aspect?
- Who did what – how was the work shared?
- Whose tools and meanings dominated?

A key line of enquiry examined the extent to which Partnerships Boards were best seen as activity systems or boundary zones. An important distinguishing feature between Boards was whether they behaved as 'stable' or 'developing': stable Boards performed with existing networks with little debate and polite consensus, while developing Boards performed with both old and new networks which debated prevention and tended to encourage innovation in practice. Other aspects of Boards' practice that were examined were multiagency practices, horizontal learning across practitioners, and vertical learning - particularly 'upstream' systemic learning between management and practitioners. The study found that Boards performed with overlapping activity systems for horizontal and vertical learning. From the perspective of boundary zones, there was a need for pedagogically structured boundary zones (a) at the practice level to distil the knowledge to be passed 'upstream' and (b) at the strategic level for that knowledge to be worked on there.

Dr Paul Warmington with a group of colleagues from four universities presented a paper on 'Learning leadership in multiagency work for integrating services into schools'. This drew on evidence from a four-year Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) research project in which they were collaborating, the *Learning in and for Interagency Working Project* (LIW). One of the LIW Project's concerns is with what might be termed 'learning leadership', defined here as the creation of environments that foster the kinds of professional learning necessary to develop on-going, integrated partnerships between

service professionals. This learning in and for multiagency working demands a capacity to recognise and access expertise distributed across local systems and to negotiate the boundaries of responsible professional action with other professionals and with service users. The paper explored the nexus between professional learning, organisational leadership and service integration in the context of current shifts in English local authorities towards 'joined up' working. Its focus was the professional learning of organisations and individuals engaged in emergent forms of multiagency practice, wherein providers operate across traditional service and team boundaries to support children and families 'at risk' of social exclusion. The paper is included in full in this publication.

David Brown's paper had the title 'Public sector leadership and integrated children's services: A new set of targets and challenges or just what we've been waiting for?'. David Brown is Executive Director of Children's Services, Walsall, and Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Birmingham, and was formerly an Executive Headteacher in Birmingham. The paper discussed some of the leadership and organisational implications for governance and schools of multi-agency working as initiated by the government's proposals in the 2003 Green Paper, *Every Child Matters* (HMT, 2003). The paper argued that the complexities surrounding implementation at different levels within the system need to be understood in the context of other significant recent changes and developments. Current attention has often been focused on the most immediate issues for policy-makers rather than the long-term implications for practitioners of what is potentially a very significant change in the way in which statutory and other bodies may operate and work with each other. A brief review of the background to this, the outcomes and target-driven framework in which we operate, was followed by some examples of initial areas of multiagency work which many local authorities are focusing upon with their partners. Finally, there was a discussion of the leadership challenges and opportunities which this presents for both 'system' leaders and for those more generally whose leadership will, to be effective, need to operate in a multiagency context outside of traditional organisational parameters. The extent to which

leadership at different levels is prepared to use the opportunities presented by recent developments will be critical to the level of impact upon children and young people.

Professor David Hartley, from the University of Birmingham, offered a critical reflection on the discourse(s) of policies, with the title, 'Education policy and the 'inter'-regnum'. In Britain, the vocabulary of public services is becoming infused with the prefixes 'inter'-, 'multi'- and 'co'-. He referred to this tendency as the 'inter'-regnum in education policy. (This did not mean that we are dealing with an 'interregnum' in the sense that we are somehow between modes of governance.) The term 'regnum' is used to emphasise that this propensity for the 'inter' is asserting itself as a new 'reigning philosophy'. Examples of the 'inter'-regnum include the fact that public-sector agencies are being encouraged to adopt 'multi'- or 'inter-agency' configurations; 'workforce reform' seeks to dissolve once-impermeable professional boundaries; leadership is to be 'distributed'. Taken together they comprise strands of a *network* regime of governance which is complementing the existing regimes of *hierarchies* and *markets*. Why this 'inter'-regnum has emerged now is of interest. He suggested three reasons. First, it resonates with the culture of consumerism, and it takes further that earlier market-based regime of governance which was associated with the new public management. Second, it is functional for the 'new capitalism' as a new work order of affinity - and solution-spaces. Third, it has important intellectual supports: that is, in addition to its association with recent marketing theory, it can appeal to emerging theory and research in organisational learning, especially activity theory.

The discussion groups which followed the keynote papers raised a range of issues and questions for further study. Discussion on leadership within a multiagency team of practitioners working with children 'at risk' or with recognised needs, identified issues of professional identity, and beliefs (both cognitive and emotional) which tended to result in resistance to multiagency working. The concept of professionalism needed to be examined. Was there evidence of disciplinary knowledge and practices becoming less 'owned' by particular groups, or of hierarchies of power being contested across and within

professional groups, resulting in their becoming 'flattened' and more democratic? What evidence is there for the apparent advantages of working collaboratively: what are the disadvantages, such as loss of professional identity and specialist skills and knowledge?

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LEARNING LEADERSHIP IN MULTIAGENCY WORK FOR INTEGRATING SERVICES INTO SCHOOLS

Paul Warmington, Harry Daniels, Anne Edwards, Jane Leadbetter, Deirdre Martin,
David Middleton, Steve Brown, Anna Popova, and Apostol Apostolov [1]

Abstract

This paper explores the nexus between professional learning, organisational leadership and service integration in the context of current shifts in English local authorities towards 'joined up' working. Its focus is the professional learning of organisations and individuals engaged in emergent forms of multiagency practice, wherein providers operate across traditional service and team boundaries to support children and families 'at risk' of social exclusion. The paper draws on evidence from the 'Learning in and for Interagency Working' Project (LIW), a four-year ESRC Teaching and Learning Research Programme study of interprofessional learning in multiagency settings. One of the LIW Project's concerns is with what might be termed 'learning leadership': defined here as the creation of environments that foster the kinds of professional learning necessary to develop on-going, integrated partnerships between service professionals. This learning in and for multiagency working demands a capacity to recognise and access expertise distributed across local systems and to negotiate the boundaries of responsible professional action with other professionals and with service users.

Introduction

This paper offers an outline of conceptual and methodological issues that have emerged during the *Learning in and for Interagency Working Project*, which commenced in January 2004 and ends in December 2007. In the most recent phases of the LIW Project we have conducted intervention research in five English local authorities. The focus of the research has been on 'learning in practice' among education, social care and health professionals working within 'multiagency' children's services (Leadbetter *et al.*, 2007). In each local authority our research methodology has been organised around series of 'developmental work research' workshops. In these workshops researchers have worked with children's services professionals to analyse the development of current knowledge and practices and, by identifying existing tensions and contradictions, to point towards new practices that might support the development of new forms of multiagency working.

The aim of the LIW Project is to try to explain what and how professionals learn in multiagency settings across education, health and social services. That is, how does multiagency working change the practices and perceptions of services professionals? What tools, contexts and values support or challenge the development of 'joined up' working?

The Learning in and for Interagency Working Project

The Learning in and for Interagency Working Project (LIW) is one of 12 research projects that comprise Phase 3 of the Economic and Social Research Council's Teaching and Learning Research Programme. Directed by Professor Harry Daniels (University of Bath) and Professor Anne Edwards (University of Oxford), LIW runs from January 2004 to December 2007. The LIW Project is being conducted in the policy climate that produced *Every Child Matters* (HMT, 2003) and 2004's Children Act. These policy developments addressed the needs of young people and families identified as being at risk of social exclusion. They called for 'joined up' responses from professionals and stressed the need for new, qualitatively different forms of multiagency practice, in which providers operate across traditional service and team boundaries. The LIW Project is concerned with examining and supporting the learning of professionals engaged in the creation of new forms of multiagency practice. Our research is driven by activity theory and is informed by three particular concerns:

- the identification of new professional practices emerging within multiagency settings
- the creation of new knowledge rooted in reflective, systemic analysis, which can be levered into more effective multiagency working
- the location of emergent multiagency practice within an understanding of the changing character of service provision and user engagement.

Local authority interventions

In Stages 1 and 2 of the project the LIW research team produced an extensive literature review (Warmington *et al.*, 2005), conducted a series of regional workshops with 17 English local authorities and began to develop conceptual models of professional learning. In Stage 3 LIW moved to a detailed examination of multiagency work practices via small-scale intensive studies in two local authorities. In the first the LIW team worked with a Youth Offending Team that included professionals from social services and probation services, plus police, parenting, education, health and drugs and alcohol officers. In the second the team worked with a newly created multi-agency project, a 'virtual' team comprising professionals from a range of services and agencies: social care, health, educational psychology, family support and CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services).

In its current stage (Stage 4) the LIW Project has repeated this intervention research on a larger scale with multiagency groupings in three local authorities. This has involved work in three multiagency settings: (a) an extended school; (b) a children in public care team; (c) a multiprofessional team that comprises education and social care professionals. All three settings were characterised by shifts towards service integration in and around schools.

Activity theory

The LIW Project's analytical framework is derived from current innovations in activity theory, particularly the work of Engeström (1987, 2001, 2004 and Engeström *et al.* 1999), who has studied the creation of new professional practices in public services. Like Engeström, we define learning as being able to interpret our worlds in increasingly complex ways and being able to respond to those interpretations. Engeström (1987, 2001) refers to this as 'expansive learning'; it is a driver of individual and organisational change. Expansive learning produces culturally new patterns of activity; it expands understanding and changes practice. Standard theories of learning fail to explain how new forms of practice are created and organisations transformed. How we respond as

professionals very much depends on whether the workplace allows the responses that are necessary. We therefore argue that individual learning cannot be separated from organisational learning (Daniels *et al.*, 2007). The LIW Project builds on this view in two ways. Firstly, we look at learning across traditional organisational and professional boundaries and not simply within one organisation or team. Secondly, we examine professional learning by following the object of professional actions.

Activity theory provides a framework in which to analyse these dimensions of professional learning. It is rooted in the work of the Russian social psychologist L.S. Vygotsky and his successors in the field (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986; Leont'ev, 1978). In essence, Vygotsky was concerned to understand human activity in terms of the dynamics between human actors (*subjects*) and the *tools* that they developed in order to impact upon aspects the world around them (the *object* of their activities). This is an object-orientated analysis of human activity; that is, its starting point is a desire to understand what it is that individuals (or organisations) are seeking to change or to shift. In the course of work in local authorities, therefore, we have asked different groups of professionals to explain what it is that they are 'working on'. When we ask this kind of question we are not just concerned with the broad outcomes that professionals want to achieve, such as, for instance, improving referral systems; we want to encourage professionals to explain the exact practices that they think they will have to transform in order to improve referral processes. It might be, for example, that they are trying to find a way to ensure that a child and family only have to complete one assessment form, rather than a series of forms. In this case the transformation of the assessment form process becomes the *object* of the activity; the various children's services professionals carrying out the activity are the *subjects*; their *tools* are the means by which they work on improving assessment forms (this could be anything from a new electronic entry system to the appointment of a key worker/ case co-coordinator to a new diary system or any other 'tool').

In order to develop activity theory Engeström (1987, 2001, 2004, 2007) has focused on examining systems of activity at the level of the collective and the community, in preference to concentrating on the individual actor. This 'second generation' of activity theory aims to represent the collective nature of activity through the addition of elements such as *community, rules* and *division of labour* and an emphasis on their interactions with each other. An important aspect of Engeström's version of activity theory is an understanding that object-oriented activity is always characterised by ambiguity, surprise, interpretation, sense making, and potential for change. In short, when we ask participants in our research what they are 'working on' the answers we receive are complex, diverse and often contradictory. Engeström (1987, 2001) also emphasises the importance of contradictions within activity systems as the driving force of change and development. By 'contradictions' we mean structural tensions that emerge over time in organisational practices. These contradictions may constrain professional practice at certain points but they may also provide a source of change and development. For instance, in the LIW study we have identified numerous instances in which the efforts of different professional groups (such as teachers, educational psychologists, health workers, social care staff) to work on a shared object (such as the wellbeing of at-risk young people) have been shaped by the contradictions that emerge from having to work to different professional targets, referral thresholds and assessment procedures (that is, conflicting sets of rules).

Developmental work research

The LIW Project has worked with children's services practitioners in five local authorities to examine and develop emergent multiagency practices. In each authority we have organised our research around a series of research workshops mainly involving operational staff. These workshops have adapted the format used by Engeström in what he terms *developmental work research* (Engeström, 2001). This is a methodology for applying activity theory in order to develop expansive learning in workplace settings. Its value to the LIW Project is that it does not assume that practitioners are always learning to master stable, defined bodies of knowledge and skills; instead it focuses on the kind of 'process' learning required in many contemporary settings, wherein work practices and

organisational configurations are undergoing rapid change and workers are creating new knowledge and new ways of working. Developmental work research-style workshops are apposite to research in current UK children's services settings, wherein policy demands for 'joined up' provision stress the need for new, qualitatively different forms of practice, in which providers must operate across traditional service and team boundaries. Developmental work research workshops begin with the 'germ cell' of individuals questioning embedded workplace practices and progressing through stepwise transformations towards new forms of practice. Building upon the principle of expansive, collective transformation, researchers work with practitioners to interrogate the deep-seated rules underpinning past and current work practices in order to point towards new potential practices. This cycle offers opportunities for reconceptualising existing activities and, ideally, for actively and collectively developing new patterns of professional activity.

In the current phase of the LIW Project we have worked with multiagency groupings in three local authorities. In each local authority our research interventions were organised around a sequence of six workshops involving operational staff and operational managers working in areas of children's services. Prior to the workshops the research team collected interview and observational data that were later jointly scrutinised in workshop settings by researchers and professionals. The workshops enabled the LIW research team to examine practitioners' 'everyday' interpretations of the professional learning emerging in the shift towards multiagency working and the organisational conditions that support such learning (Daniels *et al.*, 2007). Using activity theory as a shared analytical framework, the workshops were designed to support reflective systemic analysis by confronting 'everyday' understandings with critical analysis of the ways in which current working practices/ activities either enabled or constrained the development of innovative multiagency working.

In each workshop analyses of professional learning in and for multiagency working were developed collaboratively between the LIW research team and children's services professionals. These focused upon:

- **Present practice:** identifying structural tensions (or 'contradictions') in current working practices
- **Past practice:** encouraging professionals to consider the historical development of their working practices
- **Future practice:** working with professionals to suggest new forms of practice that might effectively support innovations in multiagency working.

The aim of the workshops was to address the challenges of multiagency professional learning by encouraging the *recognition* of areas in which there was a need for change in working practices and suggesting possibilities for change through *re-conceptualising* the 'objects' that professionals were working on, the 'tools' that professionals used in their multiagency work and the 'rules' in which their professional practices were embedded.

Multiagency working and co-configuration

Our research in Stages 1 and 2 suggested that forms of work currently emerging in multiagency children's services settings share something in common with what Victor and Boynton (1998) term *co-configuration*: the production of intelligent, flexible services with a high degree of client participation. This definition resembles innovations evident in some current children's services provision, wherein a range of agencies and otherwise loosely connected professionals coalesce to work with young people and their families. Co-configuration is, therefore, characterised by shifts away from compact teams or professional networks; children's services professionals working with particular families may not share a common professional background or values, or even a common physical location and they may meet quite fleetingly in a variety of configurations. Increasingly, children's services professionals may be operating on the cusp between new co-configuration type work and longer established professional practices. This is apparent in some of the tensions the LIW Project has identified between strategic and operational

practice, ambivalent attitudes towards interprofessional collaboration and changes in professional identity.

Distributed expertise

One of the pervasive features of the settings in which the LIW Project has worked is the emergence of distributed expertise. Multiagency service provision means that the case of an 'at risk' child is rarely the province of one 'team' but entails diverse professionals from education, social care, health and other agencies coalescing around the child's case trajectory. Therefore, issues of how expertise and specialist knowledge are claimed, owned and shared are important and often problematic. It is not only how expertise is distributed between professionals and around cases that is important; the emergence of patterns of distributed expertise has also prompted examination of professional values and beliefs and about learning to work with other professionals whose values, priorities, targets and systems might be different (Leadbetter *et al.*, 2007). In order to understand distributed expertise, it is important to explore the dynamic, relational ways in which professional learning and professional practice unfolds. One challenge presented by distributed expertise is the need to develop tools to support joint/holistic readings of young people's cases, wherein education and social care professionals try to address cases through parallel collaboration rather than producing 'discrete', sequential analyses of case needs. Our work with children's services professionals has suggested that the learning which is most critical, post-*Every Child Matters*, involves professionals grasping the deep-seated rules of emergent multiagency practice. Across the course of each workshop series participants have shown a concern to construct readings of current practices and have repeatedly emphasised processes of *coming to know* the potential networks or 'trails' of colleagues and resources; these may pre-figure effective multiagency working. These trails were more fluid and dynamic than formal teams or networks but suggested potential ways for practitioners to navigate their way around the distributed expertise existing in their local authorities and to utilise the resources contained in diverse professional expertise.

Multiprofessional learning: boundaries and trails

The concept of *boundary-crossing* offers a potential means of conceptualising the ways in which collaboration between workers from different professional backgrounds might generate new professional practices (Kerosuo & Engeström, 2003). Standard notions of professional expertise imply a vertical model, in which practitioners develop competence over time as they acquire new levels of professional knowledge, graduating 'upwards' level by level in their own specialisms. By contrast, boundary-crossing suggests that expertise is also developed when practitioners collaborate horizontally across sectors.

Among the multiagency groups involved the LIW Project the development of 'knowing who' trails has been a key element of effective multiagency working. This entails the building of knowledge about the kinds of skills and expertise other professionals can offer and a confident understanding of how to access others' expertise. In workshops practitioners have questioned the extent to which these trails work informally or need to be formalised through tools such as meetings, referral processes and information sharing databases. However, accessing distributed expertise is also dependent on professionals understanding the rules within which other professionals' practices are embedded. Contradictions emerge in multiagency activities because of contrasting professional values and also because different professionals may work to divergent targets, statutory guidelines and thresholds of concern. Therefore, boundary-crossing is predicated not only on knowledge of what other professionals do but *why* they operate as they do. Thus there is a need to focus on the ways in which professional knowledge, relationships and identities incorporate learning 'who', 'how', 'what', 'why' and 'when'. Moreover, it is important to explore the dynamic, relational ways in which professional learning and professional practice unfold. This means asking *with* whom practices are developed, where current practices lead *to*, where practices have emerged *from* and *around* what activities and processes new practices emerge. These are concerns which recognise that professional learning in and for multiagency working is embedded in fluid social and cultural contexts.

Tools, resources and systems

One of the ways in which emergent professional activities are addressed in our research is by examining the *tools* or resources that professionals draw upon and develop in order to work upon the objects of their practice. These may be concrete tools, such as case meetings or assessment forms or they may be conceptual tools. Other professionals may also become resources. In the LIW workshops professionals have been asked to present summaries of cases in which they have been involved. As well as asking questions about who was involved in each case and how the different professionals coalesced around the case, questions about tool/ resource creation were also explored. In reflecting upon the practices that emerged around a particular case, workshop participants were asked:

- *What* tools/ resources do you already have?
- *How* are you using them?
- Can they be used more *systemically*, i.e. built into the system?

The last question is central to our concern with learning in practice and knowledge creation in emerging multiagency settings. The cases presented by professionals in the LIW workshops surfaced multiple tensions in rapidly changing multiagency systems between the objects of practice, tools used to work on them and the rules within which practitioners operate. A scenario that has emerged in a number of instances suggests that professionals sometimes develop isolated innovations in practice that leave wider systems of activity untouched. For example, in a multiprofessional team with which we have worked in Stage 4 of the LIW Project an educational psychologist and an education welfare officer worked beyond the call of duty with a child who had experienced severe bullying in her secondary school. Their informal contacts with each other suggested that they had laid effective trails that had enabled them to access each other's expertise. They also felt able, within reason, to bend referral rules where necessary in order to secure the wellbeing of the child. However, what was absent was any sense that their practice made a systemic impact on the school with which they were working. As such, they remained hero-innovators but isolates. Their practice was driven by expanding the object of their practice in an 'ideological' sense, so that the 'whole child' became their object, rather

than just attendance issues (her absence from school). The wellbeing of the child, rather than the process rules of the school, was the key driver. The flexible, innovative practice that they produced addressed the immediate problem but there was no 'systemic' expansion of the object. In short, there was an unproductive contradiction between new multiagency practice and old system rules that remained in place and which suggested that were a similar case to arise, its solution would again be dependent on the goodwill and heroic practice of individual professionals.

Similar constraints on systemic expansion were apparent in an extended school where our research focused on the boundaries between the 'extended' and 'core' activities of the school. Multiagency practitioners, such as counsellors, educational psychologists and health workers, were regularly called upon to address crises but this was largely a one-way flow across the boundary between extended services and the school; there was minimal opportunity for multiagency staff to inform broader school practices, which remained steadfastly orientated around attendance, behaviour and attainment objects. In short, there was little sense that school and services might function as equal, mutually informing learning partners.

Rule-bending

In the LIW workshops it became apparent that responsive, 'joined up' service provision often called for a degree of 'rule-bending' on the part of staff. Rule-bending occurred in cases where staff had identified the need for non-routine, partially improvised decision-making in order to meet highly personalised client needs and/or rapidly changing situations. In such cases professionals sought to ensure that local authority processes and routines did not unduly constrain their responses to clients' needs. We suggest that constructive forms of rule-bending rely upon the creation of organisational climates that support flexible, responsive action by professionals and promote learning for future practice from the ways in which staff have negotiated structural tensions between rules, tools, objects and professional identity.

Glisson and Hemmelgarn's (1998) study of the effects of organisational climate and interorganisational co-ordination on the quality and outcomes of US children's services systems offers noteworthy findings in respect of rule-breaking. They conclude that efforts to improve children's services provision should focus on developing positive organisational climates that are conducive to practitioner improvisation. They argue that, while high quality services are characterised, in part, by forms of process-orientation that ensure availability, comprehensiveness and continuity, 'process-related requirements for quality service are not necessarily related to outcome criteria' (Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998, p.416). In short, approaches that are overly process-orientated risk limiting 'employee discretion and responsiveness to unexpected problems and opportunities'. Their analysis indicates that improved outcomes for young people are strongly related to practitioners' 'tenacity in navigating ...bureaucratic hurdles ...to achieve the most needed services for each child' (Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998, p.416).

We argue that organisational climates that allow for rule-bending have much in common with 'co-configuration'. That is, they are predicated upon highly responsive, highly personalised case work and customised relationships between professionals and young people that emphasise the need for client participation in planning and decision-making. Moreover, these climates are driven by results in relation to whole child wellbeing, rather than rigid adherence to process. Discussion in the LIW workshops surfaced the role that rule-bending (negotiating and challenging the structural tensions that exist in professional systems) can play in expanding professional learning in multiagency children's services settings.

Change and resistance

The LIW Project has identified the considerable resistance to change that may arise when participants in our workshops have understood that they should make changes in practice and organisation but cannot yet engage with the processes of making changes (Daniels *et al.*, 2007). Our current thinking is being influenced by Vasilyuk (1991), who discussed such examples of inner resistance and subsequent actions whereby 'a person overcomes

and conquers a crisis, restores lost spiritual equilibrium and resurrects the lost meaning of existence' (Vasilyuk, 1991, p.10). This work directs attention to the affective dimensions of change which are too often under-theorised in studies of the development of new forms of professional practice. In Engeström's (2007) latest interventionist research he has noted that whilst individual practitioners were happy to construct new models and tools for changing their work, they appeared reluctant to proceed with implementation. This resistance to the construction of new professional identities presents a challenge to the overly cognitive orientation of much activity theory-based research. In the last year of his life, Vygotsky turned his attention to a new unit of analysis, namely, *perezhivanie*. This concept may be equated with 'lived or emotional experience'; it is a concept that we hope will help us to unpack the emotional dimensions of professional identity and practice in settings such as those we have encountered in our local authority sites, wherein new forms of multiagency working and new configurations of professional expertise are emerging (Daniels *et al.*, 2007).

Conclusion

The LIW Project is concerned with the learning in practice of professionals and organisations engaged in the creation of new 'joined up' solutions aimed at meeting complex and diverse client needs. The professional learning challenges that we have identified demand a capacity to access expertise distributed across local systems, to negotiate the boundaries of responsible professional action with other professionals and, in certain instances, to push those boundaries through non-routine, partly improvisational bending of existing rules. These are forms of learning driven by a concern to support whole child wellbeing, rather than rigid adherence to organisational processes. Distributed, multiagency expertise is created when practitioners collaborate *horizontally* across sectors. However, it is likely that spaces in which practitioners are able to learn in and for multiagency working are only effectively created where there is also *vertical learning*, developed within boundary zones between *strategic* and *operational* levels of practice. Intersections between vertical and horizontal learning ideally support flexible, responsive action by professionals and promote learning for future practice by enabling

professionals to negotiate structural tensions between rules, tools, objects and professional identity. Our observation of different ways in which professionals are learning to negotiate these contradictions continues to inform our research into learning in and for multiagency working.

Endnote

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The Learning in and for Interagency Working Project website can be accessed at: <http://www.education.bham.ac.uk/research/projects/liw/default.htm>

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