Transforming the World through Transforming Self:

Improving Practice in Early Years Settings

Abstract

This paper gives an account of a group of early years practitioners who engaged in a study of their own practice within a process of collaborative inquiry exploring the question: "How can we, individually and collectively, integrate research and practice to improve the well-being of children?" As a consequence there was evidence of a transformation in their own practice and within their work-settings, supporting the argument that professional contexts should be seen as a setting for the generation as well as the application of knowledge.

Introduction and Research Question

Coming into the academic world from a professional context, I was aware of the separation between research and practice, and of a resulting mutual loss for each. During my time as a practitioner, manager, educator and consultant in social care and educational settings I had observed many examples of exceptional work with children and young people. However, it seemed that the learning gained from these examples of good practice was not informing the world of research; nor was there an emphasis on identifying the sources of information or experience that were influencing the development of such practice. A wealth of knowledge was being used and generated on a daily basis in work undertaken with children and young people; but the impact of this work was largely isolated within the individual contexts in which it took place. There was no formal means by which the learning gained was articulated and disseminated in ways which then informed policy making and research agendas.

Conversely, the outcomes of research programmes were not widely known about or applied in practice settings. A major reason for this was that accounts of research were often published in academic journals which were available only to those who were registered at a university or college that subscribed to these journals, or who paid the high personal subscription rates required. In addition, even when they were on hand, the language of the articles was not readily accessible to those not used to the jargon, or who did not have sufficient time to read and reflect on the implications for their work.

Donald Schön (1995) stated that the relationship between the academy and the professions should be changed:

> The relationship between higher and lower schools needs to be turned on its head. We should think about practice as a setting not only for the application of knowledge but for its generation. We should ask not only how practitioners can better apply the results of academic research, but what kinds of knowing are already embedded in competent practice.
>
> (1995:29)

As a new academic, I was interested to engage in research with professionals, and to develop research programmes that were grounded in their daily experience. I was influenced in my thinking by the work of Boyer (1990) who was critical of the emphasis that universities gave to the scholarship of research. Boyer suggested that in addition there were three further dimensions to scholarship that should be equally valued: the

application of knowledge in practice, the importance of teaching and learning, and the integration of knowledge across disciplines and professions. In seeking to identify ways to make research and practice more mutually relevant to each other, I felt that Boyer's reconceptualization of scholarship had much to offer when inquiring into the role the university could play in developing practice as a "setting for the generation as well as the application of knowledge." (Schön 1995: 29)

Schön further proposed that the new scholarship required a new epistemology, which could emerge from action research. He based his argument on the view that new knowledge which could be applied in practice would not be created from objective observation and analysis. Rather, in fact, it needed to arise from the practice itself: "the scholarship of application means the generation of knowledge for, and from, action." (1990:31)

An opportunity to explore these ideas arose when I was approached by a local authority School Improvement Officer with responsibility for early years settings. She was concerned because a major part of her budget was being spent on staff training programmes and attendance at conferences, yet she could see little or no improvement in practice within children's services as a consequence. She felt there was a need to identify ways of improving the well-being of children in day nursery settings, and wondered if there were a more effective means of supporting the learning and development of staff.   As a consequence of our discussions, we agreed that we invite a group of early years practitioners and managers to engage with us in an action research process that explored the question: "How can we, individually and collectively,

integrate research and practice to improve the well-being of children and young

people?"

Action research as an approach to improving child well-being

Action research is described by Reason and Bradbury as "an orientation to research that

is aimed at improving participants' lives" (2001: xxi). They say:

> By bringing scholarship and praxis back together... our immodest aim is to change
>
> the relationship between knowledge and practice, to provide a model of social
>
> science for the twenty-first century as the academy seeks additions and alternatives
>
> to its heretofore 'ivory tower' positivist model of science, research and practice
>
> ...... Action research is therefore an inherently value laden activity, usually
>
> practised by scholar-practitioners who care deeply about making a positive change
>
> in the world. (p.xxxiv)

The main theme, then, that connects all forms of action research is a commitment to

improve the world in some way, rather than be content with describing or interpreting it

as most research methodologies do, whether constructivist or positivist in orientation.

The need to develop new ways of creating knowledge that will enable us to learn how to

improve the well-being of children seems rather urgent when we look at the UNICEF

report (2007) on childhood in rich countries, where the UK is ranked 21st out of 21

countries on an overall measure of child well-being. A further piece of research by the

same authors on children's well-being in the European Union shows that in a

comparison of 25 European states, the UK ranks 21st, above only the Slovak Republic, Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania (Hoelscher and Richardson 2007). This is despite the fact that considerable research has been undertaken into children's well-being. Most of the research aims to identify measurable criteria which describe the current state of affairs, and allows the situation of children to be monitored as accurately as possible. Studies have used different indicators, and different ways of measuring those indicators (Ben-Arieh 2010). However this focus on finding increasingly precise ways to better understand and evaluate children's well-being does not appear to have succeeded in contributing to an improvement, as evidenced by the UNICEF 2007 report.

When considering a research project with early years practitioners to investigate how to improve child well-being, I wanted to engage them in a collaborative process of learning and professional development. My commitment to collaboration was influenced by Heron's (1985, 1996) model of co-operative inquiry. Heron created co-operative inquiry as a specific form of action research that has been significant in shaping a paradigm of inquiry which values participation and democracy as integral to the research process. Co-operative inquiry is a methodology which:

> involves two or more people researching a topic through their own experience of it, using a series of cycles in which they move between this experience and reflecting together on it. Each person is co-subject in the experience phases and co-researcher in the reflection phases.
>
> (Heron,1996: 1)

Heron contends that the most significant knowledge in relation to human behaviour emerges out of a process where people share their experiences with each other, and come to an understanding of the significance and validity of that experience through dialogue. The resultant learning is likely to be richer and more meaningful when derived from the inside out, rather than being imposed on them by a detached observer who has undertaken interviews with them about their experience.

> There is a political dimension to Heron's thinking that maintains that people have rights to participate in and express their own values in the design of an inquiry into their experience. Only when this condition holds can researchers ensure that their work empowers, rather than disempowers, participants.
>
> (Bray 2005:5)

In inviting early years practitioners to engage in a collaborative inquiry process, my intention was to create a rigorous progression of learning through experience and reflection on that experience, enabling the formation of responses to questions which were important to those who were involved in the inquiry.

Within the collaborative inquiry, I felt there needed to be an explicit recognition of the participants' different motivations and cultural backgrounds; and realised that each person might want to focus on specific questions relevant to their own practice. In this context I believed that a living theory approach to action research (Whitehead 1989) could usefully be integrated within a collaborative inquiry. This was particularly appropriate in the current context of encouraging practitioners to inquire into how they could improve the well-being of the children in their care, as in living theory,

individuals ask, research and respond to questions of the kind: 'how do I improve what I am doing'? (Whitehead 1989, 1993, 2005, Whitehead and McNiff 2006).

What gives living theory its distinctiveness is that it is explicitly grounded in the values that provide the foundation for how the researcher lives and works in the world; and recognises existing as a 'living contradiction' when there is a dissonance between the values they claim to hold, and how they actually behave. Living theory is, at its most fundamental, a person reflecting on this dissonance, and seeking to resolve it.

The process of creating a living theory involves the individual considering what really matters to them and how they want to make a difference in the world. It encourages them to inquire into the influences on their own learning, and how they influence the learning of others within the socio-cultural contexts in which they live and work. (Whitehead 2005).

Whitehead summarises the creation of a living theory as a reflective process where the 'I' is central:

- I experience a concern when my values are not being lived as fully as I think they could be.
- I imagine what to do about this in an action plan.
- I act and gather data with which to make a judgement on my effectiveness.
- I evaluate my actions in relation to my values and understandings.
- I modify my concerns, plans and actions in the light of my evaluations.

(Whitehead 2005)

The idea that such theories are 'living' theories:

> was further reinforced by the idea that the explanation for an individual's present
>
> practice would include an evaluation of the past practice and an intention to create
>
> something better in the future which the individual was committed to working
>
> towards.

(Whitehead 2000: 97)

I considered that a living theory approach to research, established as an integral part of a collaborative inquiry, could provide a context which would be conducive to the generation of knowledge and reflective practice that would contribute to an improvement in the well-being of children. Providing practitioner-researchers with the opportunity to share their individual inquiries within a collective setting would encourage them to connect with others in relation to common themes and mutual learning. Ledwith and Springett's idea of 'connected knowing' within a transformative model for participatory practice was relevant in this context:

> Separated knowing …underpins most academic discourse….Connected knowing
>
> emerges from …relations of trust and empathy …It is the power of connection that
>
> leads to new ways of knowing: people feel respected, heard, affirmed and
>
> validated …..In exploring multiple truths, we discover that mutuality maintains our
>
> identities within a notion of a common good.

(2010: 129-130).

In creating a collaborative inquiry, and aiming to facilitate a relationship between the concerns of the individual and a collaborative process of learning, I was recognising and exploring Bateson's (2000) concept of an 'ecology of the mind' where he shows that ideas are not contained with the psychology of the individual, but can be organised into a system of 'minds', the boundaries of which are fluid and extend beyond the individual. Guattari, in talking about the need for society to deal with contemporary challenges, contends that it will need to reconstruct itself. This will be achieved, not through centralised reform, but through an 'expansion of alternative experiences centred around a respect for singularity' (2000:59), undertaken with an awareness and reinvention of the social environment in which the individual is located.

The early years practitioners who were invited to be members of this inquiry were familiar with responding to the demands of an external bureaucracy; but did not see themselves either individually or collectively being able to affect the attitudes of those working within that bureaucracy. This project provided the opportunity to explore ways in which the singularity of individuals developed within a collaborative context could influence the wider socio-cultural contexts in which they were located.

Facilitating the collaborative inquiry

Early years professionals from eleven settings participated in the inquiry. We agreed to have monthly group meetings. In between sessions, I would meet participants as and when requested to support them in their individual inquiries.

During the initial session, I explained my view that research and policy making were not sufficiently informed by the experience and skills of practitioners; and that there was a gap between policies and practice, between good intentions and consequent outcomes. The purpose of the inquiry was to research what could be done to redress that situation: to respond to the question: "How can we, individually and collectively, integrate research and practice to improve the well-being of children?"

In establishing the collaborative inquiry, I was aiming to act as a facilitator who would create a context in which the uniqueness of each participant would be respected, and where I would work to create an ethos of mutual empowerment, trusting that each person could access their own wisdom and knowledge, and engage in a reflective process to share that with others in the group.   I communicated this view, saying that it was my belief that most human beings wanted to make a difference in the world, but that because of a dominant culture that prioritised mechanistic ways of managing organisations which accorded less value to those at the bottom of the hierarchy than to those at the top, many people became dispirited and demotivated. I wanted to work with them to discover ways in which the gaps between different roles and different levels of the hierarchy could be resolved, where boundaries would become more fluid, and where means could be found of resolving issues that made it difficult to improve the well-being of children. As they were the people working directly with children, they had a key role to play in creating the required knowledge.

Group members were introduced to the ideas of 'living theories'; and were invited to talk about how they came to be working where they were. As they reflected on their

own practice, shared their stories and listened to each other, it was clear that most

people were passionate about their work; there was a strong sense of 'loving what they

did'. By the end of the session there was a profound sense of connection and

affirmation within the group. Already, Guattari's notion of a praxis arising from the

power of recognising singularity within a collaborative ethos was being experienced.

The practitioners were then supported in the process of creating their own living

theories, to identify what their values were, and to write accounts which demonstrated

how their values were being put into practice.   Brief extracts from two practitioners are

as follows; not included as exceptional pieces of writing, rather selected for their

'normality' in demonstrating that a reflective process of thinking about values in

relation to their practice was taking place.

Practitioner 1

I always treat parents and families with friendliness, warmth and respect and

I hope that I am non-judgemental. When I came to work at the college

nursery, I found some of the staff quite judgemental and they compared

some parents parenting skills to their own, as parents. I don't think you can

do this. We all have different experiences and standards of parenting due to

the family environments people come from. I now encourage the nursery

staff to stand back and look at the individual parent's situation - perhaps

they could share their good practice with the parents? Share the children's

successes with the parents for the parents to be more aware of their child's

skills – encourage working in partnership with parents/carers? Successful

working in partnership develops empathy and mutual respect….

> It is important to me that children have a voice and feel confident enough to feel proud and valued in varying parts of their lives; and I try to pay attention to that at all times.

Practitioner 2

What are my values: That we stand back and take two minutes to be kind. We should think about what we do and how we can portray this to others . I try to put things into perspective and show kindness to those who need it to enable them to feel valued.

Why am I concerned ? Kindness does not seem to be valued any more, it's as if because it does not provide figures or meet targets then it has no place in the curriculum. Children are growing up to be harder and without conscience, this has to change.

What can I do : Set an example at all times – be the person I want others to be. Hope learners, parents children and staff will gradually pick up on this positive approach . Re-iterate at all times the need for patience and understanding when dealing with every small thing that occurs.

Each group meeting offered participants the opportunity to talk about what they had done and learned since they last met. It provided a reflective space, which allowed time for critical thinking, and gave them the opportunity to dialogue about what really mattered to them. At each of the group meetings, those present would share their accounts, and explore issues arising from them. Initially these would focus on their reflections on what the educational influences had been on their own learning; and for

many it was experiences in childhood that had impacted on them. They had not realised

the connection between those childhood experiences and the values that were important

to them in the present; but as the group progressed, many began to realise what a major

impact early events had had on their present attitudes and behaviour. For example one

participant wrote:

> I came from a family with 5 children, my mother died when I was 11. My father
> was a great believer in children learning by your own mistakes, if you are not
> allowed to make them you will never learn. I believe my father knew each and
> every one of us - he always understood my needs. Maybe this is where my
> understanding comes from of the need for all children to feel understood and
> allowed to make mistakes and learn by them, but still feel safe and secure and
> loved.

As they grew to know each other, the dialogue deepened, and they began to share

stories at an increasingly profound level. There was confirmation of Springett and

Ledwith's contention that "it is the power of connection that leads to new ways of

knowing: people feel respected, heard, affirmed and validated" (2010: 129).

Practitioners became more confident in the process of articulating what was important

to them; and each person selected an area of their work that they wanted specifically to

focus on as the basis of their contribution to the project. This enabled them to move on

to how they might influence the learning of others.

Research findings

A major learning that has emerged from the project is the realisation of the significance

of the moment-by-moment relationship that practitioners create with the children; and

that it is what they do 'in this present moment' that will make the difference. They have thus become more conscious that they need to be more aware of their thoughts, actions and feelings 'right here, right now', and should not get diverted from what is happening in this present relationship with the child by dwelling on past events or future planning. They have become conscious that the child may misinterpret their mood and behaviour if they are distracted.

It is in creating this level of constant awareness that practitioners are able to realise when there is a dissonance between their values and how they are actually behaving in practice, and can if necessary make quick and conscious adjustments. It was the growing ability of some of the practitioners to engage in this form of awareness that was reported as having the greatest impact on behaviour – and, it was claimed, led to transformative changes in the quality of relationships between the children and practitioners in the work settings, and in the relationships with their parents.

The impact of realising the importance of 'each present moment' was evidenced clearly in the following sections from one person's account:

> I started to really think about how each moment forms the characters we
> become. An early and vivid memory I have is of walking home from the shops
> with my Mum, me having the very responsible job of carrying the eggs while
> Mum carried the potatoes. Her bag split and the potatoes spilled out into the
> road. I remember her, red faced with embarrassment at having to pick the
> potatoes out of the gutter. Somehow I blamed myself for the shame that my

Mum felt, I thought I was responsible for her hardships and that guilt is now an everyday feeling for me.

This incident signifies to me the completely normal things that occur in life and how children can interpret these. My mum always told me how much she loved me and was proud of me, but I believed I wasn't worthy of such love because I couldn't see how I made her life better. I just saw her struggle with cooking cleaning and budgeting.

So now I get it. Nobody said I was worthless, I was told the opposite regularly, but my experiences and observations of life as a child moulded my soul. As practitioners we regularly say that children have brains like sponges, but do we realise exactly how much they are soaking up and how they are interpreting this information?

On my way to work at 6.30 on a cold winter's morning, 8 months pregnant with my two year old daughter, my car broke down. I cried through frustration and tiredness, knowing I would have to carry my daughter back home to phone for help. This was no different from the potato incident, but who knows how my daughter may have interpreted my silence?

So I would like to explore further how our behaviour influences the behaviour of those around us. I would like to explore with practitioners their values and encourage them to also look at moments in their past which may affect their interaction with children. The idea that transforming yourself can help transform others is fascinating and setting aside the guilt I feel about nearly

everything, I now know how understanding where I am coming from, can help

me make better decisions in the future.

In this respect the group members have been helped by being introduced to the concept of 'mindfulness', which Jon Kabat-Zinn (2005) expresses as paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally. They realise from experience that this might be easy to say, but takes considerable practice to embed into their daily behaviour.

Figure 1: Mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn 2005)

Although the concept of mindfulness has Buddhist origins (Nyanatiloka 1970) , it is close to Schön's (1995) idea of 'knowing in action', which builds on Polyani's (1958) concept of 'tacit knowing'. These relate to the view that the knowledge is **in** our action, is embodied, and can be expressed without active reflection on what is being done. Schön talks of the 'know-how' that is in the action – and gives the example of the tightrope walker whose know-how lies in the way she walks across the wire. Polyani refers to the way we can immediately recognise a face without having to go through any thought or reasoning process.

The main distinction, however, that would be made between knowing-in-action and tacit knowing on the one hand, and mindfulness on the other, is that with mindfulness there is a deliberate and conscious cultivation of being aware of what is happening in

this present moment, both in relation to one's own body, mind and behaviour, and also to the immediate environment. In being mindful, the individual could be said to be creating the optimum conditions for knowing-in-action to take place. This form of conscious awareness may sometimes, but not necessarily, be present in tacit knowing and knowing-in-action, which may arise out of unconscious embodied knowledge, when the person's thoughts may, for example, have a different focus.

The practitioners as well as writing accounts to evidence their practice, began (with the written permission of parents) to take photos and videos of daily interactions in the nurseries, with the aim of showing the quality of interactions with the children which offered evidence of the 'moment-by-moment attention' they gave to the child.

(If thought to be desirable, 2 photographs reflecting the quality of relationship between a child and an adult could be provided, and inserted here)

The nursery managers in the group have realised that as the well-being of the child rests ultimately in the hands of the person caring for that child, the manager's role is to create a context that supports and enables practitioners to provide appropriate attention 'in this present moment'. They need to be able to account for their actions in such a way that they can demonstrate what impact they are having on the well-being of children through their influence on the practitioners, and on the professional contexts in which they are working.

A further learning from the project was the importance of parents, as they are usually the most significant people in a child's life; so it is important that they are an integral part of the process; and that they too understand that how they relate to their child 'in the present moment' is vital to the child's well-being. An essential aspect, then, of the professional work of the practitioners and their managers, is how parents are engaged in ways where they feel valued, where their strengths are recognised, and where they are given appropriate support when required. Several of the group members began looking at how they could 'improve their practice' in relation to their work with parents; and on realising the significance and need for this, the local authority commissioned an extension of the inquiry to allow for this to be explored more fully.

An additional learning of group members was the realisation of their value and importance in the lives of children, which added greatly to their confidence. Many of their initial accounts communicated a lack of confidence, rooted either in childhood experiences, or being encouraged to enter into a job that did not have a high social status.

By the end of six months group members were, in a very real sense, challenging the kind of policy development and research that takes place in the 'high hard ground overlooking a swamp' (Schön 1995:28), and instead felt the researcher should "descend to the swamp of important problems where he cannot be rigorous in any way he knows how to describe" (ibid).   They became committed to finding ways of evidencing what they learned. The message they wanted to communicate was that if every person who wanted to make a positive difference to the well-being of children were to reflect on:

- what really mattered to them;

- how they would like to make a difference;

- what the values are that are motivating them to have this

  intention;

- how they could put those values into practice;

and then they paid attention 'in the moment':

- to how they put those values into practice;

- recognised any dissonance between their values and practice;

- attempted over time to 'narrow the gap' between their values, and

  values into practice;

then over time practice would improve in ways which could be evidenced and

validated.

The motivation of group members both to improve their practice, and to bring into the

public domain accounts of how they improved their practice to the benefit of the well-

being of children developed out of their commitment to what they did.   At the outset,

many of them claimed they did not do anything special – they just 'did their job'.

However after meeting for six months as a group and learning to pay attention to and

reflect on their practice, they began to be aware and be proud of the significance of their

role.

The project has been evaluated by a senior commissioning manager from the local

authority through interviews with participants in the project. Without exception the

feedback was positive, with practitioners providing examples of the impact on themselves, on practice within the setting, and on communication between different settings:

> Being part of the collaborative inquiry is like being on a journey rather than a course. It is an open ended journey that has different stages without a pass or fail. I feel valued, and privileged to be a part of this project. I now have a different view, I feel inspired, I don't feel stale and I am not lonely.
>
> (Participant 1)

> Staff are more committed to spending their time with children without allowing themselves to be distracted. There is more attention paid to the interaction with the child.   Staff are more supportive of each other, and the quality of supervision sessions has improved. Since being on the programme we are more open with parents. Parents are interested in what we are doing, and we have many willing volunteers to help us improve what we do with children.
>
> (Participant 2)

> We used to be very competitive with other day nurseries. That is no longer the case. Through getting to know each other in the collaborative inquiry and sharing ideas, experiences and problems, this has improved relationships, and I feel there is now less competition between colleagues from the other settings involved.
>
> (Participant 3)

Conclusion

The main purpose of this paper has been to challenge the effectiveness of traditional

forms of research in generating the knowledge required to improve the well-being of

children. It has been argued that there is a need to develop research methodologies that

will focus on the resolution of real issues impacting on child well-being. The core

contention is that such research needs to be grounded in the experience of practitioners

who work directly with the children, and to identify ways in which they can be

supported in researching their own practice.

A process of collaborative inquiry was introduced as a means of enabling practitioners

and managers to engage in reflective dialogue about the significance of their role, and to

explore what they could do to improve the well-being of children. Recognising their

different motivations and cultural backgrounds, each person was encouraged to create

their own living theory, including what mattered to them, what their values were, and

how they could improve what they did to make a difference to the lives of the children

in their care. The action plans they created as a result of this process became

meaningful and dynamic guides to action.

The integration of individual and collective forms of inquiry has so far proven to be a

powerful methodology for grounding the creation of knowledge in the experience of

practitioners.   Through the empowering of individuals working at a grassroots level

within a collaborative inquiry context, it offers a way of 'transforming the world

through transforming self'. As each person becomes more confident in their own value,

there is a growing commitment to use their learning to influence the learning of others

in the workplace and the wider organisation for the benefit of children and their parents. This process is in its early stages; however the project has demonstrated the value of exploring further the contribution that an integration of collaborative inquiry and living theory can make to creating a dynamic inter-relationship between the individual and the collective as means of improving the well-being of children.

The practitioners in this inquiry have discovered that the learning they gained from their experience holds the possibility of offering much to the worlds of research and policy development. In the second phase of the inquiry, the intention is to focus on how this can be achieved, and how the learning that has so far taken place at an individual and day nursery level can be disseminated in such a way that the influence is systemic. Based on the improvement in practice that has been observed by senior managers in the organisation, the project has now been expanded into youth services, out-of-school clubs, and into services for children with disabilities. The evidence gained so far suggests there is considerable potential for achieving widespread change in the organisation, based on supporting individuals to be reflective practitioners and knowledge creators in their daily work through creating their own living theories within a structured process of collaborative inquiry. There seems to be considerable power in the notion of "transforming the world through transforming self" which merits further exploration.

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