

From: Joan Walton <waltonj@HOPE.AC.UK>
Subject: Report on a collaborative inquiry
Date: 19 September 2010 17:48:06 GMT+01:00
To: CARN@JISMAIL.AC.UK
Reply-To: Joan Walton <waltonj@HOPE.AC.UK>
Dear All

I am currently working with Janice Darkes-Sutcliffe, who works with schools and early years settings for Liverpool County Council, in a collaborative inquiry (CI) with practitioners and managers in early years children's settings. We are taking an action research (living theory) approach to the work that we do; and of course in this we are supported by Jack Whitehead who plays a valuable role as visiting professor at Liverpool Hope, and who has contributed much to the work that we are doing.

My main research interest is exploring *How do we integrate research and practice, across disciplines and between professions, to enable a demonstrable improvement in the wellbeing of children and young people?* This specific project is one way in which I am engaging with this research question.

I would welcome hearing from others who share this research interest, whatever setting you are working in; and of course from those of you who specifically have an interest in the wellbeing of children and young people. I am attaching a document that I am sending out to members of this CI group, so that you get a sense of where the project is going. Group members have so far met together on three occasions, and are learning how to develop as knowledge-creators within their day-to-day work.

If you have any comments to make about what you read, it would be good to receive them, either on or off this list. Also, if any of you also have an interest in the overall research question, and would like to look at ways in which the work that you do, or the interests you have, could link in with what we are doing here, then that would be great also.

My ultimate aim as you will see from the attached paper is to create a group of people who are motivated to find ways of influencing policy and political decision-making based on a more dynamic relationship between research and practice than is currently the case; but realise that this is going to take a concerted and well-focused collective effort, as no one individual or organisation is going to achieve this on their own.

In many ways, this is a follow-up to the CARN Study Day that took place at LHU last November, and at which a number of you were participants. That day was enjoyable, productive and energising, and I would like to think that we can continue to build on some of the ideas that were discussed there (and I know in a number of cases have been followed up in different contexts).

I hope that what I am doing here interests at least some of you, and look forward to hearing from you. If you know of anyone not on these lists who may be interested in this initiative, please do forward this on.

Thank you.

Best wishes,

Joan

--

Dr Joan Walton
Director of the Centre for the Child and Family

Faculty of Education
Liverpool Hope University
Hope Park
Liverpool
L16 9JD

Phone: 0151 291 2115
Mob: 07827 813723
Email: waltonj@hope.ac.uk

**Integrating research and practice to improve
the well-being of children and young people**

Joan Walton

Liverpool Hope University

Preamble

The Centre for the Child and Family is working in partnership with Liverpool City Council in a project with Aiming High for Disabled Children (AHDC). The aim of this project is to create ways to improve the well-being of children generally, and those being assessed as having disabilities specifically. The project is taking the form of a collaborative inquiry, where early years practitioners are addressing the question: *How do we integrate research and practice to enable a demonstrable improvement in the wellbeing of children and young people?*

Engaging in the collaborative inquiry

The starting point is that at the moment, we know that nationally (globally) we have a long way to go before we can say that the five outcomes of Every Child Matters are met for every child – we have a long way to go before we can confidently say that we are doing all we can to maximise the wellbeing of each child in ways that recognise their unique gifts and talents. The UNICEF research project shows us that across a range of ‘wellbeing’ indicators, the UK ranks 21st out of 21 countries (see http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/rc7_eng.pdf.)

A conclusion that can be drawn from this is that research currently being undertaken may be helping us to describe or explain some of the issues relevant to children's wellbeing; what it is not doing is helping us to substantially improve it.

This is hardly surprising; as research is often carried out by academics who are 'observing' practice, and providing some kind of 'objective' analysis of what they observe. The research publications they produce may appear in journals or books – but they are not often in a form that is easily accessible and understandable by practitioners going about their work.

The major assumption underpinning the AHDC project is that practitioners living and working with children on a daily basis both hold and create valuable knowledge in relation to knowing what is required to improve the wellbeing of children – and that if research is to make a real impact on the quality of children's lives, it should be grounded in the work of practitioners who are seeking to enhance the well-being of children.

This means that everyone who sees themselves as a 'researcher' needs to be able to account for how their interventions influence the lives of children. The 'practitioner as researcher' is in the easiest position in which to do this, as they are working directly with children; so need to provide an account (with evidence) as to what it is they are doing that promotes the wellbeing of the children in their care; and (if we accept that no-one's practice is perfect) how can they 'improve what they are doing'? This process enables them to create knowledge (i.e. research) that will help us learn how to improve practice with children.

A manager needs to be able to account for how they create a context that enables practitioners to improve and account for their practice; a senior manager at whatever level (including e.g. a Director of Social Services) should be able to account for what they do in ways that demonstrate the impact of their actions on the wellbeing of children for whom the service they direct is responsible.

A researcher should be able to account for how their research is 'making a difference', as well as providing a descriptive or interpretive/explanatory commentary which can be used to influence practice.

We have a considerable way to go if we are to learn how to truly ground research in the work of practitioners; because as a culture, we are so used to seeing research and practice as two different (and often mutually exclusive) activities. Although the concept of 'practitioner-researcher' has in recent years become commonly used, it is generally used in the context of encouraging practitioners to be more reflective and see themselves as 'researchers' in their own work; but not to see themselves as knowledge-creators whose findings are explicitly fed into a wider research agenda, and used to influence policy making and political decision making at local and national governmental levels. However, it is an underpinning belief of this project that policy making and political decision-making should be influenced by research grounded in the work of practitioners. It is the aim of this project to make a contribution towards showing how this can be achieved.

For a practitioner or a manager to become knowledge-creators of this kind there are three stages.

1. What have been the educational influences on the learning in your life?

Tell the story of how you come to be where you are today in your life. This story may well, though not necessarily, start in your childhood, (because it is often in our childhood years that we experience the main formative influences in our lives).

It may help you to tell your story if you use the following questions as a guide to your writing:

- What has influenced me to become the person I am?
- What really matters to me?
- What are the values that inform what I do?
- What experiences have I had that have led me to have the values that are most important to me?

2. How have you influenced the learning of others?

- Give an account of how you put your values into practice, and in so doing, how you feel you have influenced the learning of others.
- As human beings, we are not perfect, so we will experience ‘living contradictions’ when we do not put our values into practice as well as we would like – so do include examples of these ‘living contradictions’ in your account, perhaps also reflecting on why you think this happened, what you learned from the experience etc.
- In providing an account of how you influence the learning of others, what values / standards would you like to be judged by?
- What evidence can you produce to demonstrate that the account you give is valid and reliable?
- In terms of contributing to research concerning how to improve the wellbeing of children, what knowledge have you created that you would like to offer and see validated within a research context?

3. How have you influenced the learning of the social and political contexts in which you live and work?

This is an aspect of what we are doing that will emerge as a result of the work we do together, and of the sharing of experience of each person involved in this project. We will collate the collective learning that emerges out of the individual experiences, and see what themes and messages emerge. We can then plan how these can be used to influence policy and practice at a wider level, both through publications, and face-to-face meetings with people in key decision-making positions.

It will not be realistic to include in this inquiry every aspect of what you do in your attempt to improve practice in your work. So after you have written your initial ‘story’ which identifies what matters to you and your core values, it is important then to identify an aspect of what is particularly important to you, that you can use as your focus at this point in time (this may change over time, and that is fine). I include the proforma that I gave out at the session (based on Jack Whitehead and Jean McNiff’s

action research framework); and also the sections that I have so far completed, so that you can see both how I have responded to these questions, and how what I am doing is complementing what I am asking you to do. This involves you identifying something that concerns you, and exploring how you might address that concern. As we share our enquiries I anticipate that we will move closer together in the creation of a collaborative influence in enhancing the well-being of children, young people and indeed the well-being of those who live and work with them.

Joan Walton

September 2010

Framework for research

What really matters to me? What do I care passionately about? What kind of difference do I want to make in the world?	
What are my values and why?	
What is my concern?	
Why am I concerned?	
What kind of experiences can I describe to show the reasons for my concerns?	
What can I do about it?	
What will I do about it?	
How do I evaluate the educational influences of my actions?	

How do I demonstrate the validity of the account of my educational influence in learning?	
How do I modify my concerns, ideas and actions in the light of my evaluation?	

AHDC Collaborative Inquiry

Joan Walton

Question	Response
What really matters to me?	<p>What really matters to me is that there is a closer, more dynamic and mutually informing relationship between research and practice;</p> <p>and that the creation of knowledge and research publications in relation to the wellbeing of children and young people are grounded in the work and values of committed practitioners, who want to contribute to the “flourishing of humanity through education and research” (Liverpool Hope University website 2010).</p>
What are my values?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">* Respect (for each person based on our shared humanity);* Participation (everyone has an equal right to participate);* Mutual empowerment (people may have equal rights, but may not have the skills or confidence to participate – so important to do what is possible to enable them to do so).* The creation and sharing of educational knowledge.
What is my concern?	<p>UK 21st out of 21 in terms of children’s wellbeing (UNICEF 2007).</p> <p>Research that is being undertaken is not of the kind that enables us to know how to improve the quality of children’s lives – it does not enable us as a nation to ‘improve our practice’ in relation to improving the wellbeing of children.</p>
Why am I concerned?	<p>Children are still suffering in similar ways to how they were when I started work at the age of 18 as a residential childcare officer.</p>
What kind of experiences can I describe to show the	<p>Research is published – but does not often directly inform practice.</p>

<p>reasons for my concerns?</p>	<p>Practitioners and others are committed, do excellent work, and improve the quality of children's lives – but in isolated settings – and the knowledge that is known / created does not often influence the world of published research.</p>
<p>What can I do about it?</p>	<p>Encourage the development of a network of people who are willing to explore how to develop a closer, more dynamic and mutually informing relationship between research and practice.</p>
<p>What will I do about it?</p>	<p>Create research projects where the research is grounded in the experience of practitioners, and it is their voices which are influencing the research. Encourage practitioners to understand the critically important role they play in the creation of knowledge concerning what can help improve the wellbeing of children.</p> <p>Support practitioners in whatever way they require to enable them to contribute in a useful way to the research world, in ways that reflect the practitioner's values, and what they feel matters to them.</p>
<p>How do I evaluate the educational influences of my actions?</p>	<p>Feedback from all those involved with me in this process. Identify inter-subjectively agreed criteria that will enable an improvement in children's well-being to be recorded and judged.</p>
<p>How do I demonstrate and enhance the validity of the accounts of my educational influence in learning?</p>	<p>This will involve the submission of my accounts to validation groups, and include responses to the questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How could I enhance the comprehensibility of my account? 2. How could I strengthen the data-gathering and evidence-based claims that I make? 3. How could I extend and deepen my awareness of the educational/values background that influences my writing and understandings?
<p>How do I modify my concerns, ideas and actions in the light of my evaluation?</p>	

