



Learning in and for Interagency Working Teaching and Learning Research Programme 2004-2007

Background to the Research

The *Learning in and for Interagency Working* Project (LIW) is one of twelve research projects in 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 research has taken place in the policy climate of *Every Child Matters* and the 2004 *Children Act* and has focussed on interagency collaboration in work with children and families at risk of social exclusion. LIW has examined and supported the learning of professionals who were engaged in developing new forms of multi-agency practice. It also involved an extension project, *Learning in and for Interagency Working: Multi-agency Work in Northern Ireland* (2005-2007), which looked at interaction between agencies dealing with young people at risk of exclusion from school in Northern Ireland. The major research questions to be discussed today are what are professionals learning when they do into agency work, and what forms of interpersonal and organisational practice associated with this learning.

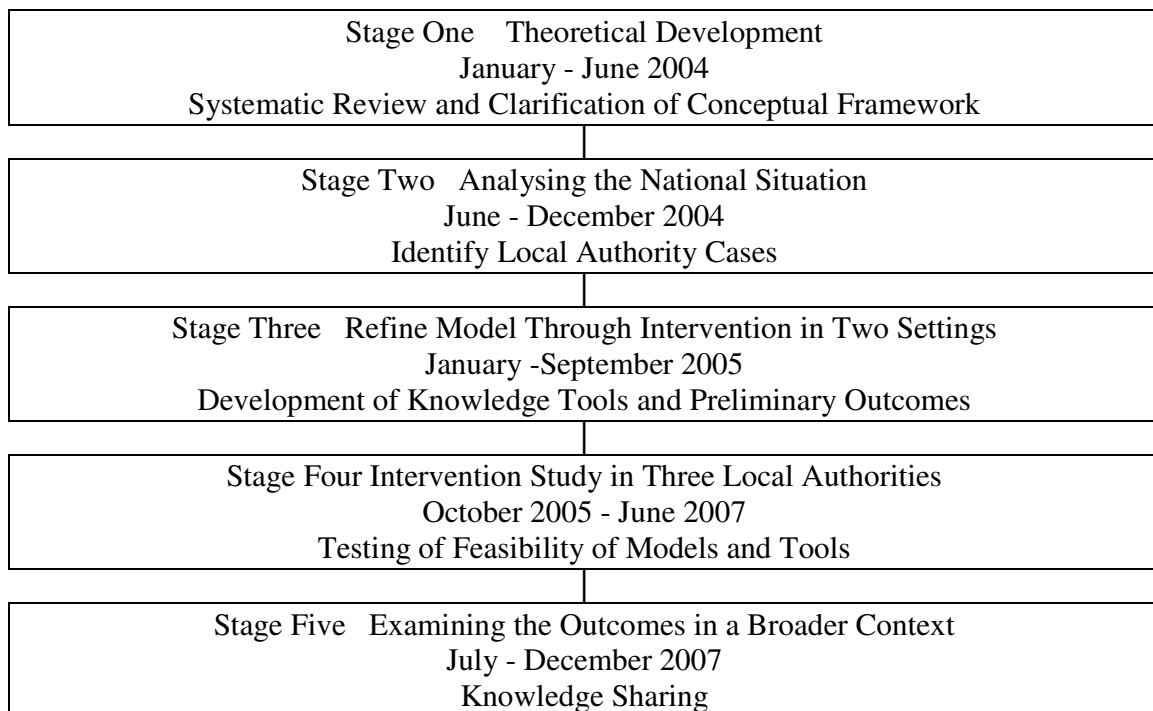
Over the four years of the research we have worked with practitioners such as educational psychologists, children and families workers, teachers, education welfare officers, health professionals, speech and language therapists and colleagues from the voluntary sector who were all learning to work together in ways they had not done before in order to support the social inclusion of children and young people. They were learning to do this work while relationships between their organisations were reconfigured around them as a result of the 2004 *Children Act* and the changes that led to it. Practitioners remained focused on what they saw as the needs of children and adjusted their ways of working. In many ways their practices raced ahead of both local and national strategies as they worked creatively for children in shifting systems. LIW was set up to capture the learning that occurred in these developing practices and the conditions that made learning possible.

Social exclusion is a complex phenomenon which threatens the well-being of both individuals and their communities, and 'prevention of social exclusion' emerged as a new core concept in welfare services in England in the late 1990s. For example, vulnerability

to social exclusion arises from a combination of factors which may include housing, health and education. Many see it as a dynamic which can be disrupted by professionals who are able to see the whole picture and work together. Social inclusion has in the last decade been seen as an entitlement to integration into society as both an individual right and a societal necessity.

Seeing vulnerability to social exclusion as a dynamic rather than a static condition has huge implications for professional practices. The dynamic is the outcome of interactions across different domains of a child's life and it can only be disrupted if the responses to it are multi-dimensional. Also, because vulnerability may not be evident until a picture of accumulated difficulty is picked up by looking across a child's life, all services which work with children need to be brought into the processes of, for example, assessment. These changes have called for new forms of inter-professional work, new ways of looking at children with other professionals and new ways of responding to the picture of the child that emerges.

Outline of the Project



In 2004 the research team produced an extensive literature review, and conducted a series of regional workshops with seventeen English local authorities, selected from an existing database which identified those which were moving towards new models of inter-professional work to prevent social exclusion. These workshops informed the team's conceptualising models of professional learning. In Stage 3 we moved to a

detailed examination of multi-agency work practices via small-scale intensive studies in two local authorities. In the first the LIW team worked with a Youth Offending Team which included professionals from social services and probation services, and police, parenting, education, health and drugs and alcohol officers. In the second we worked with a newly created multi-agency project, a ‘virtual’ team comprising professionals from a range of services and agencies (social work, health, educational psychology, CAMHS, and family support). In stage 4 (2004–2006) the LIW Project repeated this intervention research on a larger scale in three other local authorities. This involved work in three multi-agency settings, an extended school, a children in public care team, and a multi-professional team that initially comprised education professionals but was subsequently expanded to include social care and health practitioners as well. An important element in this phase was the involvement of a local authority-based researcher in each site. In stage 5, the project conducted comprehensive analyses of the data and engaged in dissemination activities, most of which have been aimed at checking the extent to which the ideas emerging in the analyses reflect practices in other local authorities.

The Interventions

In stages 3 and 4 in each case study local authority our research was organised ultimately around a sequence of six workshops involving practitioners. These workshops were highly structured, and based on the precepts of activity theory. Prior to the workshops the research team collected interview and observational data that were then scrutinised in workshop settings by researchers and professionals from each local authority. The aim was to build upon professionals’ ‘everyday’ understandings of multi-agency working to elicit reflective, systemic analysis of the ways in which current working practices either enabled or constrained the development of innovative multi-agency working. The aim of the workshops was to address the challenges of multi-agency professional learning by encouraging the *recognition* of areas where there was a need for change in working practices, and suggesting possibilities for change through *re-conceptualising* professional tasks and the resources that practitioners brought to bear on those tasks.

In each workshop analyses of multiagency practice were developed collaboratively between the research team and professionals from education and children’s services. The workshops focussed on *past practice*, encouraging professionals to consider the historical development of their working practices, *present practice*, identifying structural tensions and contradictions, and *future practice*, working with professionals to suggest new forms of practice that might effectively support innovations in multiagency working.

The workshops were videoed and recorded, and detailed analysis of emergent concepts was undertaken. These concepts will be discussed today.