LEARNING IN AND FOR INTER-AGENCY WORKING

Report on ESRC one-day conference, 13th November, 2007

1. The LIW Project is one of 12 which comprise Phase 3 of the ESRC's Teaching and Learning Research Programme. Directed by Professor Harry Daniels (University of Bath) and Professor Anne Edwards (University of Oxford), the LIW Project, which extended from January, 2004, till December, 2007, sought to examine and support the development of professional learning in multi-agency settings. The research was conducted with children's services personnel in a series of UK local authorities as they developed the collaborative working practices required by the *Every Child Matters* agenda. The purpose of the seminar was to allow the researchers to share preliminary findings with relevant constituencies and UCET was pleased to receive an invitation.

2. The seminar was held at the London Institute of Education and was chaired by Dame Gillian Pugh, currently Visiting Professor at the Institute. In her opening remarks, Professor Pugh provided a brief historical outline of the policy drivers, including ECM, of the development of integrated services for children and young people. Such services were now expected to improve the quality of provision for all and in so doing to seek to reduce the gap between those who are achieving well and those who are not. To date, there had been insufficient evidence on the effectiveness of integrated services: the WIL Project and the seminar were an attempt to address that shortcoming.

3. Professor Anne Edwards located the project in the context of preventing the social exclusion which threatens the well-being of individuals and their communities. Preventing social exclusion, she argued, "is to disrupt a child's trajectory of vulnerability". Vulnerability to social exclusion could only be addressed if the responses to it are multi-dimensional. These responses therefore called for new forms of inter-professional and inter-agency working *and learning*. Professionals needed to learn how to work outside "the safety of their institutional shelters", and to see their own interventions in relation to those of others. The processes through which professionals developed this "relational" as opposed to "individual" agency were complex but grew out of engagements in professional settings.

4. Professor Harry Daniels gave a detailed account of the evidence-gathering procedures of the project. The principal mode of investigation was the study of inter-professional discussions of work-based problems, each case study consisting of a series of two-hour "developmental workshops", the recording of these engagements and their subsequent analysis, drawing on Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), which explores the exchanges that occur as practitioners learn a new way of working.

5. Against that background, two members of the research team, Dr Jane Leadbetter and Dr Paul Warmington of Birmingham University, provided an introduction to the project's principal findings. In summary, they drew attention to the need for professionals to know how to know who can work with them; to be "pedagogic and developmental with other professionals"; to make their professional values explicit; to focus on the whole child in the wider context; to be clear about their own focus and expertise but to recognise the expertise distributed across the system; and to be able to develop the strategies they need to take their work forward with other professionals.

6. Drawing attention to the implications of the project for professional preparation, CPD, and organisational health, Professor Edwards and Professor Daniels stressed the need for professionals to see themselves as part of a distributed system of expertise working on children's trajectories; as working relationally and responsibly with other professionals inside and outside their home organisations; as being professionally multi-lingual; as having an obligation to share professional perspectives with others; as being able to "bend'" rules if they get in the way of being responsive to a child's needs (i.e. begin to reshape rules so that they can collaborate with other professionals); and as being able to make and re-work the tools (resources) they use to support children's trajectories.

7. The work of the project suggested that to establish the enhanced form of professionalism now required it was possible now to identify what **all** practitioners need to know and be able to do: to be **confident** in their own expertise; to be **alert** to signs of vulnerability; to know **where** in the organisation to take their concerns about a child (know how to know who in their own organisations); to know **about** the local (external) system of inter-professional support for vulnerable children; to know the **limits** of

their expertise and what is expected of them; and to know **how to let other practitioners take the lead** with a child (e.g. teachers can reduce curriculum pressure if child is distressed).

8. The project pointed to certain implications for CPD. There was a need for awareness-raising with regard to expectations and systems for all staff, with discussions of examples of children's trajectories and the support they receive outside the school. Besides, there was a need for regular and supported meetings for boundary staff with other professionals in order to build trust; to make their distinct expertise explicit; to learn each other's language and ways of interpreting and categorising children; to discuss how they can collaborate on specific cases; and to develop their own confidence pathways in local networks

9. There were implications also for organisations. They needed to organise in a way that allows institutional leaders and strategists to listen to and learn from those providing front-line services, beyond rhetorical "consultation"; they should put in place structures that derive their rationale from processes as well as outcomes; they should analyse rule systems for future action rather than allow legacies of the past to dominate the future; they should structure the division of labour (vertical and horizontal) to align with new demands; they should organise for regular purposeful reflection oriented to "surfacing" underlying tensions in practices and the development of new tools for new tasks; and they should organise to articulate objects (what needs to be worked on) rather than focus on outcomes alone.

10. Bringing the seminar to a close, Professor Pugh stressed the importance of work-based learning for nurturing inter-professional collaboration; of creating opportunities for colleagues to reflect on their professional work; of devoting as much time to organisational change as is currently devoted to effecting changes in people; and of ensuring that the outcomes of research found their way into the thinking of policy-makers. Finally, touching on a theme raised in her introductory remarks, Professor Pugh suggested that in the response to ECM there had been an understandable concern to create "joined-up teams of professionals", but perhaps insufficient time had been devoted to the development of "joined-up individuals", those whose professional preparation drew on several traditions, similar to the "social pedagogue" of some countries on the continent. Was there

still time for that approach to be incorporated into the UK arrangements for nurturing the well-being of children and young people?

Gordon Kirk,
Academic Secretary. 16th November, 2007