

*Practitioner Research in **CHILDREN 1st**: Cohorts, Networks and
Systems*

**Report prepared for
The Institute for Research and Innovation in the Social Services**

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Practitioner Research in CHILDREN 1st: Cohorts, Networks and Systems

Executive Summary

Background

The practitioner research initiative of CHILDREN 1st and the Glasgow School of Social Work aimed at supporting practitioners to develop and undertake their own small-scale research projects. The Project sought to have an impact at three levels – individual, team, and organisation. Two cohorts of practitioners were recruited – in 2006 and 2007.

Practitioners were provided with training and support to undertake a small-scale research project. Training took the form of a series of structured, face-to-face training days with ongoing one-to-one support provided by an academic tutor via contact by telephone and email throughout the research process. Teaching content was aimed towards small-scale research and leaned towards qualitative over quantitative.

Practitioner participation in the programme did not require any formal qualifications or research experience. The research topics and questions were either identified by the agency or by the practitioners. For each hour that participants used of their working time, they were expected to match with an hour of their own time.

Evaluation method

Our evaluation drew on case study methods. We undertook a desk-based review of *documentation* (including project development documents and training materials). In addition to the document analysis, fieldwork comprised semi-structured interviews (eight face to face and five by telephone) with members of all stakeholder groups, three informal meetings, and three focus groups.

Programme delivery

Six key types of support were provided by tutors: direction and teaching on methods; helping with design and implementation; support around practicalities; discussion of ethical dilemmas; emotional support including reassurance; and keeping projects to timescale.

Identifying the specific topic was often seen as a push and pull process where efforts were jointly made to bring individual interests and agency priorities into step. Practitioners expressed a commitment to change practice for the better – either one's own or that of the team or agency. For some practitioners this practice interest was located in deeply felt '*practice puzzles*'.

Fine-tuning and re-shaping ideas was perceived as entailing a process of focusing and downsizing. Practitioners' limited prior understanding and experience of research left them in a weak position when it came to negotiating their project topic.

Those delivering the programme valued the motivation and enthusiasm of practitioners throughout the life of the projects. Training days were seen as a mixed blessing. Training was most valuable when it was pithy, focused and tuned in to practitioners' needs. Momentum was often felt to be difficult to sustain.

Support

The interplay of agency managers, cohort colleagues, practice colleagues, university and tutors serve to support, encourage (or discourage), focus, shape, sustain and (re)direct the projects.

Tutoring: Individual tutoring was perhaps the single most valued element within the Project package. Advice that was 'focused', prompt, enthusiastic was uniformly appreciated. We sensed a recurring uncertainty about the 'rules of engagement' for practitioner-tutor contact on the part of practitioners.

Cohort and practice support: Cohort membership was valued for knowing 'that you weren't doing it on your own'. Enthusiastic colleagues in wider teams were invaluable, e.g. identifying children and young people who could be part of a sample.

CHILDREN 1st and management: Members of the first cohort were especially appreciative of the commitment and 'hands on' engagement from senior management. There was a hint from Cohort 2 members that this active engagement may have weakened a little over time.

Doing practitioner research

This widely observed difference between the two cohorts is intriguing and we are not confident we have fully understood it. Whatever the explanation, strong support systems do not, as such, guarantee progress.

Time: Time to allow practitioners to get on and complete their research was consistently mentioned by tutors as a potential barrier to progress or completion. There was a perception among practitioners that, even in circumstances where employers are supportive, the research is always likely to be an extra.

Ethics: Obtaining ethical review during the research process was seen as a particular difficulty for the second cohort. This meant significant delay and frustration for practitioners and tutors alike.

Fieldwork: Project practitioners could claim familiarity with the modes of data collection chosen – particularly interviewing – but the linked processes of analysis and writing posed initial challenges for many.

There were various occasions of practitioners speaking of their fieldwork in ways that suggest it opened fresh and ‘inspirational’ visions of the possibilities of such work, and a newly minted fascination that research practice has the potential to yield understanding and insight that often escapes day to day practice.

Technology: Limitations in the CHILDREN 1st technology resources were noted especially by people in the first cohort. These were perhaps compounded by limited IT skills among some cohort members.

Consequences, benefits and outcomes

Uncertainty regarding audience was a strong theme. Those who had completed their reports perceived a lack of feedback on the part of the agency. For at least some of the participants, their projects *had* delivered new understandings for their practice.

Overall benefits: Practitioners, tutors and agency managers perceived the benefits to include the opportunity to develop practitioner research experience and research skills; direct changes to practice; and the transferability of skills.

Tutors: were keen to stress how much they enjoyed being involved in the Project and tutoring individual projects and the benefits this accrued. Tutors had important things to say about themselves as beneficiaries. It enabled experienced practitioners now based within university settings to be reinvigorated about practice and to maintain stronger connections between the university and the ‘grass-roots’.

For organizations: benefits were identified for both CHILDREN 1st and the academics such as consolidating relationships between the university and CHILDREN 1st so that continued exchanges might result. There were perceived internal benefits derived from the Project in terms of greater communication and collegiality.

CHILDREN 1st: identified wider external benefits that the Project has given them such as greater credibility in academic and policy-making settings and the ability to contribute towards a broader vision of social work. Benefits were also identified around the development of a broader learning culture within the organisation, and the ability to be self critical.

However, practitioners conveyed a concern that the wider agency programme had been foregrounded at the expense of the individual projects. This may fail to fully appreciate the significance of their projects for practitioners, for whom the doing of practitioner research was itself almost an epiphany, at least for a significant core.

Reflections on developing a practitioner research network

- Agency sponsored research networks are always likely to present a tension about who makes decisions regarding research questions.

- A networked project has consequences for practitioners as cohort members. For example, there were influential group norms about progress that played a strong part in how projects developed.
- Practitioner research offers a form of work that brings together and contains different career-life concerns that otherwise may remain scattered.
- Practitioner researchers engage with a language and culture that is strange yet potentially rewarding for practice and research.
- Practitioner research sits creatively but uncomfortably between the established cultures of research and professional practice.
- Practitioner research prompts a fruitful re-engagement with professional memories, which has the potential to develop future professional identities.
- Involvement in practitioner research stirs reflection on the meaning and value of research and professional work.

Introduction

Changing Lives: The 21st Century Social Work Review (Scottish Executive, 2006), identified a need for a national research and development strategy for social work services in Scotland. It identified the current evidence base as weak, reflecting a lack of research in social work practice, and that where evidence does exist that it is not accessible to practitioners in a way that it can inform their practice. Consequently, the review called for a “national research and development strategy for social work services, which not only develops new evidence but presents existing evidence in a way that informs practice and develops the expertise in the workforce to use it and evaluate its impact” (Scottish Executive, 2006; 55).

The purpose of the strategy is to increase the quantity and quality of research activity, and its dissemination and integration into practice, in order to improve and develop social services. The work plan for the development of the strategy has identified the need for activities that embed research in social services organisations, create a social services infrastructure, and increase research capacity and capability (Skinner, 2007). Generating more practitioner research has been highlighted as desirable in that it can assist in embedding research in social services organisations and in increasing research capacity and capability.

A central aspect of increasing the quantity and quality of research is to generate interest in research at all levels of social service organisations. Increasing the generation of practitioner research in social services has been identified as an activity that can have a bearing on the aims of the research and development strategy as a whole (Skinner, 2007) and the practitioner research initiative undertaken by CHILDREN 1st and the Glasgow School of Social Work is therefore of great interest.

The initiative aimed at supporting practitioners to develop and undertake their own small-scale research projects. Research training and support was provided by university based staff, and CHILDREN 1st assisted in the coordination of the initiative. The objectives of the CHILDREN 1st practitioner research programme were to:

- Promote reflective and investigative practice among participants
- Develop strong and effective links with leading institutes
- Develop the evidence base for practice in the key areas of CHILDREN 1st area of service provision
- Further the professional development of the individual practitioners taking part in the programme
- Influence practice by disseminating findings both internally and externally
- Improve outcomes for children and families
- Support the development of a learning culture within CHILDREN 1st

The Institute for Research and Innovation in the Social Services commissioned researchers at the University of York to undertake an evaluation study of the practitioner research initiative. The purposes of the research project were two-fold: to review the literature on practitioner research in

Social Service¹ and to evaluate a practitioner research initiative in order to learn about the barriers and facilitators for practitioner research and the impact it can have on workforce development, service planning and delivery. The Research objectives were:

1. To establish through a literature review a wider context for practitioner research and its impact on practice
2. To assess whether and in what ways the CHILDREN 1st practitioner initiative has met its objectives
3. To assess whether and in what way the practitioner research project has impacted on workforce development, service delivery and service planning
4. To identify issues that will support future practitioner research initiatives both at CHILDREN 1st and for social services more widely.

More specifically the research sought to:

- Examine the recruitment and selection process of participants of the initiative and reasons for non-selection and non-participation.
- Explore what had been learnt by the organisation from the process of implementing the initiative.
- Explore the views of participating practitioners, training providers and CHILDREN 1st staff about the delivery of the programme and the support provided for the participants.
- Explore the views of participating and non-participating practitioners, training providers and CHILDREN 1st staff about the impact of the programme on practitioner, practitioner teams, service delivery, service planning and the organisations.
- Determine whether and in what way the practitioner research initiative has met its objectives.
- Identify factors that have acted as barriers and facilitators to meeting its objectives and whether and in what ways this has implications for future initiatives at CHILDREN 1st, as well as for other practitioner research initiatives for social services in Scotland.

The evaluation methodology is outlined more fully in Appendix 1.

¹ Mitchell, F., Lunt, N. and Shaw, I. (2008) 'Practitioner Research in Social Services: A literature review', Report Prepared for the Institute for Research and Innovation in the Social Services, York: University of York. A summary of the findings can be accessed at <http://www.iriss.ac.uk/files/iriss-practitioner-research-lit-review-2009-01.pdf>

Background

The programme was initially developed in and began in 2005 as one part of implementing the broader strategic vision of the agency:

our position as a charity with our own independent income means that one of our aims in our strategic plan is not only to develop and deliver quality services but to have an impact on services generally (Services Director).

Addressing training needs was perceived as fundamental given that training was perceived to lag behind the agency's development. The Project offered opportunities to develop stronger links with social work academics, and to develop 'research-mindedness' among the practitioners employed by the agency.

we don't want just to be doing work, we want to commit to excellence and if you want to do that you have to invest in both your practitioners and in what training you offer them (Services Director).

The Project was funded by CHILDREN 1st with resources provided by drawing on a 3% training levy the agency had accumulated. The Project was one a number of training initiatives including *Leading to Deliver* training (offered free by government for social work managers), and the child protection certificate.

The Project idea originated with the Services Director, who drew on personal experience of developing critical appraisal skills through postgraduate training in social research. There was also the support of senior management within the agency. The Project sought to make a difference at three key levels: '... impact on the individual, impact on the team, impact on the organisation' (Services Director). The aims are encapsulated as being:

to develop our knowledge of the impacts of our work, to increase awareness of research and research methods in the agency, to develop a sort of culture of reflective practice not just in the practitioners but in the teams that they were working in because the expectation is that people would be talking there and using the knowledge and training that they were getting to reflect on other initiatives (Services Director).

The notion of developing 'research-mindedness' was used to signal a range of potential benefits. This would be achieved by giving practitioners critical tools to look at their own practice – to ask question; to develop hunches about efficacy; and to consider how to measure impacts.

Establishing the Project

The Services Director of CHILDREN 1st made an approach to the then director of the Centre for the Child in Society at the University of Glasgow. It was envisaged that practitioners would be provided with training and support to undertake a small-scale research project that was relevant to the practice areas (family group conferencing, abuse recovery, family support and child

protection) of the agency. Academic providers were excited about the model and the prospect of *'working with one organisation that was really committed'* (Cohort 1 Tutor: B) and developing the Project: *'I really believe in the notion of the practice scholar'* (Cohort 2 Tutor: D).

It was agreed that the provision of training would take the form of a series of structured, face-to-face training days with ongoing one-to-one support provided by an academic tutor via contact by telephone and email throughout the research process. Telephone and email communication would be an important part of the Project because:

people would come from all over the country... it's how you take the gown out to the town. It would have to be done by electronically and at a distance (Services Director).

Initially four training days were planned (but this was extended to five) with the first two being held close together to provide a basic introduction to the fundamentals of social research and the second two, on data analysis and writing up, being held at a point in time that coincided with the progress of the research studies undertaken by the practitioners.

Format and content of the taught input

The taught input took the format of all-day training days that were held in a venue organised by the agency. The first training day was facilitated by all four tutors involved and the subsequent days were facilitated by two tutors. The first and second days were held close together and aimed to form the basis on which the practitioners could design their studies, plan for the conduct of the study and undertake the fieldwork for their research. The third and fourth days were planned to coincide with the point at which the practitioners reached the analysis and writing up stages. Each training day had an associated deadline with a specified date for the practitioners to produce a written outline of an aspect of their study relating to the different stages of the research process (i.e. proposal, draft research tools, outline of fieldwork undertaken, and report drafts). Teaching content was aimed towards small-scale research and leaned towards qualitative over quantitative.

The first day was used as an opportunity for all of the tutors and practitioners involved to meet. It provided a general introduction to research, which covered both general topics (i.e. clarifying research aims and objectives, sampling and data collection methods) and specific topics relating to researching with children, and researching as a practitioner. The second day was used to introduce the practitioners to different data collection methods (i.e. interviews, focus groups and questionnaires), issues associated with using them (i.e. recording) and ethics. The third day focused on undertaking analysis and the fourth on writing up. The additional fifth day was used as a day for interim contact between the specified training days to deal with any issues arising for the practitioners and to assist them with the stage that they were at.

Each of the days included some direct input and some interactive exercises or activities. This teaching was accompanied by handouts and linked to exercises. In addition to the direct input and exercises, sessions also included more general discussions, sometimes starting from points and issues raised by the practitioners, especially in the later stages of each programme.

Selection

The practitioners involved in the programme are all employees of CHILDREN 1st, an organisation of 300 staff spread across a great many local authorities and types of services. Within CHILDREN 1st there were four national working groups established in 2004/5 and each Assistant Director has a regional and a thematic responsibility. They were responsible for convening a work group and every member of staff related to at least one workgroup for purposes of information exchange. It was provisionally expected the Project would provide two places for each work group and each of the four regions.

The over-riding principles was that we wanted...our different work groups represented ... we also wanted to see a decent geographical split within the country with practitioner staff from different parts of the organisation. (Learning and Development Coordinator)

They were recruited to the programme as a result of a general communication circulated to all practitioners within the agency, which invited expressions of interest. At the point at which this was circulated to all practitioners, managers were also asked to nominate anyone who they thought may be interested or have an aptitude for conducting research. From those that came forward, individuals were then selected to reflect the practice and geographic areas covered by the agency.

Their participation in the programme was dependent upon agreement with their line managers. No formal qualifications or research experience were required for entry to the programme but individuals had to have demonstrated their potential capability and have capacity within their work to commit to the demands of the programme over time. There was some self-selection and negotiation given the range of other courses that practitioners were already committed to.

The research topics and questions were either identified by the agency or by the practitioners. The practitioners had the final choice in the topic to be researched. Tutors assisted with focusing the research questions and the scale of the projects:

it wasn't to be a condition of doing it that they had to do a topic that some other group of people set for them. It had to be their curiosity and their sort of interest (Services Director).

As a result some took direct suggestion from the work groups and others developed ideas for themselves. Irrespective, practitioners themselves were expected to be committed and enthusiastic about involvement:

We don't want to push anybody down this road, we actively encourage and support people but it is made very clear that this has to be juggled with your day job and that is one of the challenges (Learning and Development Coordinator).

Project Operation and Administration

The training sessions were organised by the learning and development co-ordinator within CHILDREN 1st who liaised with the University staff and practitioners. All financial costs associated with the programme were paid by CHILDREN 1st, including the training and any subsistence and travel costs incurred in attending it. For each hour that participants used of their working time, they were expected to match with an hour of their own time. The use of working time was agreed but to be negotiated on an individual basis with line managers and within teams. Participants had access to administrative support within their teams, if they wanted it, and were permitted to use the IT systems and telephone for the purposes of the research. Text books and recording equipment were purchased by CHILDREN 1st for use by the second cohort (as a result of feedback from cohort 1). Practitioners were permitted to approach clients linked with the agency, either through their own contacts or those of colleagues within the agency. The entire fieldwork, analysis and write-up for each individual study were conducted by the individual practitioners.

In many respects the project was uncharted territory for the agency and academic provider and there was a great deal of flexibility and '*ad hoc decision making*' (Cohort 1 Tutor: B). One aspect of this novelty was the struggle to find an appropriate terminology to capture the academic/practitioner relationship that was developing:

Well, we struggled with terminology because the tendency was to use the usual university terminology like tutor and supervisors as against researcher but some of that wasn't entirely appropriate so we haven't always used those terms. (Cohort1 Tutor: B)

it's interesting we haven't necessarily come up with a term for this, you're using the term mentoring, we have perhaps tended when we have used the term at all, that it's more tutoring, I think either is possible, but I suppose anyway that kind of role (Cohort 1 Tutor: B)

Due to the level of interest within CHILDREN 1st and the perceived success of the first cohort, it was decided that the programme should run again for a second year. The timing of which coincided with a move by the director of the Centre for the Child in Society to the Glasgow School of Social Work, which resulted in a change in the provider although the programme took the same format.

All those associated with the delivery of the Project felt the Learning and Development Coordinator performed a crucial role. This role covered five key functions:

i) Contact point

I touch base with people...feeding back to individuals, managers, assisting students along the way, digging out things on request
(Learning and Development Coordinator).

ii) Establishing and clarifying Project parameters – such as the practitioners and agency entering into an agreement on joint ownership of the studies which outlined their

respective rights on the publication and dissemination of the research findings resulting from the individual studies:

I came up with the format of an agreement. ... The idea is that the research and the findings would be jointly owned by both parties and that one or other would seek the others consent or approval before they used it...(Learning and Development Coordinator)

iii) Information 'Clearinghouse':

normally within the organisation we have got somebody who knows something about the subject or we've got reference material (Learning and Development Coordinator).

I have a number of academic sources that I can call upon to answer questions if they need (Learning and Development Coordinator)

iv) Trouble-shooting:

occasionally in the first cohort getting the communication structures working as well as they could be between students and practitioners' support from the university where they needed to get an answer on something (Learning and Development Coordinator).

Their tutors have it is a kind of unwritten rule that they will let me know [about any student delays] (Learning and Development Coordinator).

v) Organising events

Getting people together, making sure things happen on the day that we set up for training, organise all the events, organise all the learning outcomes, make sure by a system of quality control and checking that we get everything happening that should be happening (Learning and Development Coordinator)

The training materials used took the form of power point presentations, handouts, exercises and reference lists. All materials were drawn up by the tutors facilitating the sessions, and were either designed specifically for the programme or adapted from teaching materials used in other research training provided by the individuals. The materials include background on the fundamentals of social research (design, method, ethics) and also more in-depth exploration of issues relevant to the context of the CHILDREN 1st practitioners (exploring issues relating to researching with children or to insider/outsider research).

Project flexibility

The Project developed in an incremental and responsive way. There was flexibility around: what input was provided and when; delivery style; how levels of support were provided; and timelines for and completing project phases. A number of decisions were taken and format revised as the Project progressed.

Some additional *content* was added, for example around presentation skills, when there was seen to be a gap or development in the programme. An additional training day was added given practitioner progress did not meet initial expectations:

we were due to be doing something on analysis, we realised that hardly anyone or in fact I think no one at that stage had gathered any data and that therefore, analysis was going to be premature. So, we in fact did a more informal session which was largely around dealing with issues that had arisen (Cohort 1 Tutor: B)

we did sort of keep it under review, so an extra day, or some extra time was added into the first programme that then became a normal part of the second programme... we are looking at developing like maybe an away day or two days for writing up that they would all go to together somewhere...away from the demands of home and job... (Services Director)

In terms of *style*, and perhaps a reflection of some differences between University and practitioner cultures and expectations, there were changes in how training was delivered during Cohort 1. A stated part of the organisation's culture and way of working was that individuals were participative in training:

feedback half way through the first course ...saying they wanted or more interactive and participative time with the tutors (Services Director).

There was flexibility in the *level of support* from tutors that was offered rather than a set format and formalisation of input:

Different people will need different levels of support. Because we do tend to want to keep things flexible depending on the nature of the depth and difficulty of what is being undertaken. (Learning and Development Coordinator).

Finally, timing of sessions was flexible and reflected where practitioners were at on their individual project timelines:

... the only things that were in tablets of stone were the first couple of training days because they were incremental, knowledge building things in order to start the project. Beyond that depending on where folk were, it made sense to build it around when the last person was ready. (Learning and Development Coordinator)

Tutor Support

Each practitioner was allocated a tutor. In the first cohort, practitioners were matched with a tutor who had some experience or interest in their research topic. In the second cohort some were also matched with tutors who had a specific interest in or experience of their research topic. The plan was to provide tutorial support through email and telephone contact, but some tutors also met face-to-face with their tutees either because it was practically possible or because they had missed training days and required additional input to catch up. Contact was either pre-

arranged to discuss the development of a particular stage/feedback on written work that practitioners had undertaken or ad hoc when the practitioners felt a need to check out or clarify their understanding or next steps.

Six key types of support were provided by tutors: direction and teaching on methods; helping with design and implementation; support around practicalities; discussion of dilemmas; emotional support; and keeping them to timescale.

Direction and teaching on methods: The tutors provided handouts and references in relation to the subjects for each of the training days, and access to additional supporting materials (either sources on research methods or relating to research topics) for each of the practitioners:

we've deliberately front loaded it, for fairly obvious reasons to get people the input we felt they needed early on in order to equip them to go out and do the things they were planning to do, so that means that after a certain period the main contact is largely to do with the mentoring and support role (Cohort 1 Tutor: B).

Second, helping with design and implementation was an important mentoring and support role and includes ensuring the scope and scale of individual projects were achievable and ensuring research quality:

actually trying to keep it to scale what they were doing as it was just a small piece of work that they were doing. But part of it was commenting on the work, the schedules and things, helping them to develop them (Cohort 1 Tutor: C)

They had their own ideas but we did help keep them to focus, so that they wouldn't get too big (Cohort 1 Tutor: E)

help a person succeed in completing a project that is rigorous enough so if they are doing something that is unethical or totally contradictory to the research design or whatever then guidance and support supervision wise and also support to successfully complete (Cohort 1 Tutor: C).

Third, support around the practicalities of undertaking research included providing access to references to support the development of ideas, and advice on fieldwork recruitment, recording and transcribing.

Fourth, there was discussion of ethical dilemmas that practitioners encounter during their research projects:

...one of the issues we were raising was about that young people may feel that they should take part because of the relationship that they had pre-existing with them as a practitioner and trying to make a sort of divide in the relation between them as a practitioner and them as a researcher ... (Cohort 1 Tutor: C).

how they were going to report it given that they were working in sometimes quite identifiable units and so the sort of strategies that were adopted for that. (Cohort 1 Tutor: C).

Fifth, emotional support included reassurance and working to build confidence. Often this meant encouraging practitioners to take a strength-based perspective to research and having them recognise the skills and abilities they brought to the research process:

Well, kind of a bit of reassurance support as well as more practical support about research...helping them feel that they could do it (Cohort 1 Tutor: E).

it was the idea to make researchers feel it was actually a relatively short step to becoming the research practitioner, something they could do as an extension of what they were doing, certainly they would need to add skills and knowledge but it wasn't, there wasn't a huge gap between what they were doing day to day and what they would do on the project (Cohort1 Tutor: B).

I think probably just confidence actually and I think transferring a lot of the skills that they had already to the research environment...they didn't realise that they had all these resources to draw upon (Cohort 1 Tutor: C).

Finally, ensuring projects kept to timescale was an aspiration – albeit one not always realised:

I think the knowledge and skills stuff is the key but I also think there is a component of providing a structure and almost, like, I think most of us need some external authority (Cohort 2 Tutor: D).

getting the balance right between not harassing and hassling people and at the same time trying to keep their commitment up I suppose (Cohort 1 Tutor: B).

Practitioner Research in CHILDREN 1st

The review of the literature formed one of the contexts for the inquiry into and evaluation of the CHILDREN 1st creative venture into practitioner research. Yet a comparison of the literature review (Mitchell, Lunt and Shaw, 2008) with this subsequent inquiry would indicate that they cover rather different territories. The main part of this report has relatively little directly to say about the individual projects that comprised the two cohorts – the methodology, negotiation of consent, data collection, actual processes of analysis and writing, or efforts at dissemination and utilization that went into the completed, to be uncompleted, or not-to-be completed reports.

The themes of this report can be picked out if we take, for example, what was learned from listening to practitioners² – speaking either as individuals or within focus groups. The fieldwork sheds light on a range of personal and relational questions:

- What predisposed them to become engaged in practitioner research?
- What understanding did they bring with them to their involvement and how did this understanding shift and change during their projects?
- What were the push and pull factors that led down pathways to the diverse research topics?
- How did the interplay of agency managers, cohort colleagues, practice colleagues, university and tutors serve to support, encourage (or discourage), focus, shape, sustain and (re)direct the projects?
- What elements of the research experience figure most prominently in the accounts of the practitioners?
- What were the outcomes, impacts and consequences of projects and programme?
- What difference did it make that the projects and practitioners were part of a planned network of events?

If this list of roughly linear considerations formed the warp of the initiative – running vertically down through time – a weft of analytic ideas regarding language, memory, moral accountability, ownership, meaning, value, and social work practice ran horizontally across each of the themes. This suggests to us that the experience of practitioner research has to be understood as interwoven, and bringing together and containing different career-life concerns that otherwise may remain scattered. Practitioner research of the kind described in what follows³ should not be seen as a less or more comfortable bolt-on to everyday core practice, but as a multiform activity that challenges the taken-for-grantedness of practice, mainstream academic research, management and, in all likelihood, the experience of receiving services.

² We have given pen-names to practitioners, taken from a website of Scottish names.

³ This general conclusion may not apply equally to practitioner research where a higher education qualification is the primary objective.

Getting into practitioner research

In an agency where most social work staff are qualified, is there any reason to think that those who are drawn to practitioner research are – or ought to be – different from those who do not? Are some favourably predisposed either individually, by prior experience or by practice context? Are those who have been exposed to research in one way or another more likely to become involved? We discuss the second question a little later. We did not specifically ask people the cluster of linked issues under the first question, but take, for example, the following remarks made to us.

I *will* do the project...if at all possible...regardless of the barriers. (Gillian)

It does require the individuals to be hugely motivated, hugely proactive really. (Jean)

I want to make sure it's a good piece of work so I will work really hard to do that, I won't just produce any old thing, that's how I feel, that's just about me about my personality (Shona)

I know there's a personal thing in there that I came back to learning quite late. When I went back to my social work training I was 26 or 27, actually never had completed what I thought I was capable of academically earlier for various reasons. There's a sense of achievement that's important to me (Shona)

This sense of personal drive was on occasion complemented by a curiosity about the world. Reflecting on the experience of her own cohort, Lesley remarked,

I'm interested in ... whether you start off as six and only three end up, whether that has an impact on you, I don't know. I am interested in why I haven't done it because I'd been very enthusiastic about it, I was excited about it, don't quite know why, just questions it has raised

She also wondered if the context of her own practice had a bearing:

[Practice context] are researched to the nth degree, it's quite interesting so you have that almost as a thing when you're working in [practice context] or meeting people. It's a very interesting way of working because there's so much discussion and so much acknowledgement of things not working which never happens in my experience in other forms of social work, so I was enthusiastic.

This might all suggest, in a common sense kind of way, that those who do practitioner research will bring a prior interest in or experience of social work research. This does not seem to be the case. When asked about their knowledge and experience of research before the Project⁴ started the typical range of replies was:

Ah, pretty limited, pretty limited (Alan)

Very, very little (Gillian)

I knew roughly the difference between methods... qualitative and quantitative I suppose but very basic ...I just had a wee bit understanding of I suppose how you can analyse on

⁴ 'Project' with capital P always refers to the Children 1st practitioner research initiative as a whole.

a small piece and consent and some of the ethical things to take into consideration (Alison)

I'd done things, talking years and years ago, so there's things vaguely at the back of my mind (Jean)

I've got no qualification, and no training before this project, always been interested in it but I've never really participated (Lorna)

The notion of a dormant curiosity in Lorna's comment was perhaps true of others. 'I think I was quite curious about research' as one focus group participant expressed it. In Shona's words, 'it's something that I haven't ever done before, so to be able to talk about, undertaking a piece of research or a study in this way, I quite like that, I quite like to be learning new things'.

This was one area of questions that was likely to provoke reflection. For example, Lesley admitted that 'I find academia, education, quite difficult...I have a fear of being found wanting'. Yet the sense of dormant curiosity awakened by the Project was perhaps strongest in her:

It's interesting because at one point in my life I worked part time, had an elderly father so I worked part time. In that part time bit I did a three year research project which was looking at fathers, what do children need from fathers which is actually quite a long time ago, must be about 17 years ago, that was interesting because I never really say that, but I really enjoyed, I was just an interviewer, part of the research team.

And of a further previous project she remarked 'in a way that's quite interesting when you think about it, that's part of my life, I don't dwell on it but...' There seems to be a connection between then and now, such that her present research led her to rethink her previous, part-time involvement, and to a new recognition that there is a strand which she did not 'dwell on' or 'say' hitherto. This was one of a number of instances where involvement in practitioner research seemed to have prompted fresh understandings of previous lives and careers.

Gillian expressed something similar when reflecting that she thought it was her involvement in the Project that was why she had subsequently been willing to get involved with someone else's research. 'Did I want the help of others and therefore was willing to give research help?'

Decisions about topics

Practitioners – and indeed all those to whom we spoke – had much to say about how project⁵ topics emerged and were agreed, and in ways that shed helpful light on an agency level Project of this nature. Some were clear and unambiguous regarding how this had happened. Others – perhaps the majority - described a looser, less well defined experience. This was the general stance of practitioners in the first cohort focus group.

I guess a challenge for me was that I hadn't actually given doing the research much thought and, well I hadn't. [*laughter*] We got an e-mail saying 'oh there's an opportunity to do some research' and I wrote back saying "oh sounds interesting, keep me posted",

⁵ 'project' with lower case 'p' always refers to individual practitioner research projects.

that was it. And then I got, “you’ve been selected to do research” so to talk about going into it blind - that was absolutely it.

I do remember a fleeting conversation with my line manager, I’ve got an e-mail saying ‘turn up here’ on this day’ and then just got carried away with the process and thought “oh God, I’m in this now” and then kind of getting to the end but there was no real sense of what you were going to achieve - to which it was probably a bit naïve on my part to say ‘yeah I’ll do that’.

I would do it again. But I just think it’s helpful to have the boundaries [*expressions of agreement*] and yes, to have more than ‘oh yes did I really hear that - half personal, half work time’

Identifying the specific topic was often described as the outcome of a push and pull process where efforts were jointly made to bring individual interests and agency priorities into step. When asked if this was individual choice or agency interest Alan remarked ‘a bit of both really’. This was not always comfortable. Alan went on later to talk about how his original interest had changed. Asked how this happened he replied:

That’s a good question. I had forwarded my proposal and the feedback that I got was that I had been accepted for the programme but the national working group wanted to match me with one of the topics that they had selected so I think I gave feedback ... immediately after the research that it was quite a difficult process. It wasn’t straightforward, you know. We were led to believe that ... the topic that we had selected would be the one that would be allocated. You know, if we were selected we would be selected with the topic – but what happened was we were selected in principle as a practitioner and matched with a topic.

Anticipating what we say later regarding support mechanisms, this was not necessarily wholly negative. To conclude Alan’s story, he referred to a meeting with his tutor, saying

I think that conversation was important. I mean I think I felt I was kind of heard in terms of the frustrations, the early frustrations of the process but also you know that after that meeting I felt like well I was interested in engaging with fathers.

Others, especially in the second Cohort, had fewer misgivings⁶.

There were other topics that were suggested from within CHILDREN 1st but they didn’t interest me so much, they agreed I could do that (Jean)

It was very much about me wanting to do, it wasn’t a kind of, it wasn’t put on to me as something I was expected to do, it was a choice (Shona)

⁶ The evidence is tenuous, but it was our impression that organizational lesson learning was a significant feature at certain, though not all, points.

The most persistent note in project topics was a commitment to change practice for the better – either one’s own or that of the team or agency. This also included those who had an intrinsic interest in research. The following remarks capture the ways in which this commitment was expressed, sometimes with a potentially costly personal investment were it not to achieve its goal⁷:

Having an opportunity to do research that would impact on services and ultimately on those people who would receive those services’ (Gillian)

...immediately applicable to work – that the stuff was relevant – so I suppose it was something like that that was the motivation. (FG2)

Well, just, it is partly the whole thing of getting to this part of my career and looking back and thinking ‘right ok and what are important things?’ You know, just having the time to reflect and to learn for myself and also hopefully there will be something there that is of benefit to other people. (FG2)

it would be nice to think something, even if it is only one thing, could come of it, you know, what we do (FG2)

The actual subject matter was almost instant because I knew there was a need and I really I wanted to tie in the research to the practice that we have on a daily basis (Shona)

For some practitioners this practice interest was located in deeply felt ‘*practice puzzles*’ such that their research was often a lens that facilitated a focus on fairly major, sometimes partly unrealized, and long contained career-life issues. The accounts we were given were sometimes sensitive and we have kept back some details to protect the identities of those concerned. Comparing herself to another practitioner, one person said ‘I think I offer support in different ways to what this person offered and...I just wondered about what was useful to parents’. A focus group member described the operation of family plans, observing

I find that plans are not followed by various groupings and so ... I wondered why that was and was that something we could really work on. So irritation prompted me really. But it was something that you could really use and I think I really thought that too.

Someone else actively puzzled, saying ‘I want to understand more, I want to know what it is about parenting, why parents are seen as drug users first and parents second’. The idea of ‘practice puzzles’ was triggered by another practitioner who – asking that we do not quote any identifying details – recalled a conversation with a colleague four years previously that s/he had not understood and had ‘parked’, but which now provided the focus for the project. We believe the weight of these personal commitments, puzzles and investments may be underestimated in organizational deliberations about practitioner research projects.

⁷ We return to the implications of personal costs when we discuss participants’ conclusions regarding the meaning and value of the Project and projects.

Finally, our fieldwork suggested something about how the negotiation process was perceived by practitioners. *First*, it entailed a process of focusing and downsizing. Several people talked about how their first ideas had been too ‘ambitious’. Jean was not untypical in her remark about the outcome of discussions with her tutor, that ‘I think I was surprised at the size, in terms of numbers, that it’s relatively small, but relieved in a way’. One or two also described their relief that they were not expected to examine large scale statistics. *Second*, we were stuck by how the limited prior understanding and experience of research left them in a weak position when it came to negotiating their project topic. As Lorna expressed it, ‘that was actually very difficult, trying to decide what to do. I think that was partly where my lack of training or closer experience with research handicapped me’. While this may not have been a serious problem in what appeared to us an essentially beneficent process, it could prove a major issue in a more top down, inflexible Project. The following extract from Alison’s interview captures the point well:

Alison: well I had a topic in mind that would have been very difficult to do and I don’t know how you would have done it but it is still an area that I am interested in so...
What was that?

Alison: Well I didn’t tell them. But it was really about working with families where there is a paedophile living within the home or there is somebody who has abused a child living within the home... sexual abuse... because I have done a couple of assessments where somebody has been living within the family home who previously has sexually abused a child and about risk assessment. So I suppose that would’ve... well I don’t know what I would have wanted to do with it but I was just quite interested in at that time. So I was interested in but I think it would have been very complex one.
And you didn’t put that forward as an idea?

Alison: No I didn’t, no. I just thought it would have been very complex and how would I do it and it was also about getting people’s consent and I think it would have been quite difficult...

This process was sometimes poignant in its sense of disappointment. A focus group member described her regret in this account of how her interests were channelled into conventional research paths through her discussion with her tutor:

One sad thing for me is I wanted to - I don’t know whether to say it, or if it is the place to say it but - I wanted to use the children as asking the questions to other children and I really, really wanted that. I have been counselled out of it! *Have you? By your tutor?*
Yeh. I just had two wonderful, an eight and a nine year old, who I think could ask these questions. And really it was about confidentiality and how they would maintain confidentiality within the families. But I think it is a real pity that.

We touch on research ethics later, but these incidents pose the question whether, as Hammersley claims (2000, cf Shaw, 2008), methodology become inappropriately ‘ethicised’ such that broader methodological questions get absorbed in a reductionist way into ethics.

Encourage, focus, shape, sustain and (re)direct?

The nature and working of the Project infrastructure was perhaps the most distinguishing feature of the initiative. How did the interplay of agency managers, cohort colleagues, practice colleagues, university and tutors serve to support, encourage (or discourage), focus, shape, sustain and (re)direct the projects? The fieldwork yielded a wealth of data about these processes and we can only sketch them here.

Training and tutoring

Those delivering the programme, both tutors and CHILDREN 1st staff, identified factors they believed important in practitioners completing their projects. These success factors included being able to harness the motivation and enthusiasm of participants throughout the life of their project, and the commitment and flexibility of tutors in supporting the practitioners. Thus, individual motivation and interest of individual practitioners was seen as a necessary - albeit not sufficient - condition of success. Some are perhaps a little keen to push forwards with completing their research than others.

one was a bit more motivated than the other, she was just a bit more interested in her topic and I think had a bit of a wider topic... But they both completed

(Cohort 1 Tutor: E)

The role of tutors was identified by CHILDREN 1st staff as a prerequisite for success:

Basically they leave no stone unturned apart from obviously giving the people the answers to everything that they are searching for...the feedback from the students is that the support from the tutors has been absolutely excellent

(Learning and Development Coordinator)

The commitment of tutors to completing their involvement was very evident in Cohort 1 when two tutors moved jobs but maintained involvement. Despite suggestions that tutors with practice experience or knowledge could 'sit on the interface of academic and fieldwork' and bring additional benefits to the tutoring relationship, there was no clear link between tutor background (such as practice experience or previous teaching experience) and practitioners' completion of projects.

Shona, talking about training and tutoring, observed, 'I don't think I could make a distinction between the two easily'. Indeed, practitioners sometimes talked as if the various elements of support (or absence of it) were an intertwined whole. Training days were seen as a mixed blessing. Alan thought that 'a wee bit of advice and input' prior to the first session would have given participants a clearer focus. Not that there was a perceived lack of materials. 'We were given lots of material in advance of that - probably too much material on reflection' (Alan). Training for the first cohort was initially received as too lecture oriented - 'it was just really dry. There wasn't any interaction' (Alison). This seems to have been acknowledged and changed for the better. As one second cohort member remarked, 'I think they were extremely good. There was lots of interaction, a lot of question and answer, discussing points' (Jean).

The Cohort 2 focus group valued support, as expressed in phrases picked from the interview:

- to look at...examples of previous work
- the relationship with the lecturer when one is proof reading
- just talking about things
- face-to-face meeting with the tutor
- email contact has been very useful
- telling me that you didn't need to interview 25 people that you would get away with just five.
- the proof reading of the permissions ..., she was enormously supportive and including she did a literature search and found websites for me where I could search papers that might be relevant
- bouncing around of ideas

A recurring point was the appreciation of 'focused' input. Alan's summary will stand for comments from everyone:

I found his inputs, particularly effective. He seemed to ... have a good idea of what information we needed and almost all of the sessions that he led were focused and you came out after it, you know, thinking that really moves me on in thinking about my research. Some of the other tutors, you know, perhaps a bit less focused, more general. It is a bit hard to describe but it perhaps wasn't as kind of pithy as you like. It was more ... like, 'Well we will cover quite a wide view of ... research methods and you can ... pick and choose which one is for you', whereas X did seem to tune into us more as practitioners and what we would need to hear as input, what would be useful for us.

Pithy, focused, being tuned in to practitioners, and being moved on in their thinking seem to encapsulate what was valued in the training. However, valued training inputs are unlikely to prove sufficient. Jean remarked 'a training day, an input day, is really inspiring, - come away from that saying "Great, I can do it, off I go and I'll do it", and somehow it's then difficult to sustain'. We suggest possible reasons for this in our subsequent comments about the relation between project practitioners and their teams.

Individual tutoring was perhaps the single most valued element within the Project package. There were many comments as positive as the following extracts from the focus group for the first cohort:

for me having the tutor there, and someone who was so enthusiastic about the process and so helpful just really helped me come through the process of it and to the other end and I was thinking this is not her new job, there are other bits to what she is doing, so conscious of their time management as well.

I must admit I loved the bit that came back

I loved waiting to see what would come back

Because there was a lot of red in mine - you could tell that this person had really studied. [*expressions of agreement*] That they, the stuff that came back was really good and it wouldn't just take five minutes.

The preference for focus and clear advice recurred. Advice that was 'focused', prompt, enthusiastic, 'helping me refine my mad ideas into something workable', offering reassurance about methods or sample size was uniformly appreciated. When this was not present, or if tutors were thought to be 'laid back' (Jean), practitioners were more likely to get stuck or temporarily lost in uncertainty. Part of this problem may have resided in an uncertainty about the 'rules of engagement'. 'I might have found it helpful actually if she had kind of sent me the odd e-mail but whether it was maybe while when I was off on maternity leave and it wasn't okay to do that - I don't know' (FG1). Given what we have said about the prior experience that practitioners bring to their projects, this uncertainty is likely to be a frequent occurrence. It lies behind the comment by Lesley who, when asked if she would have preferred the stick to the carrot, replied, 'absolutely, the carrot hasn't worked at all...to be honest I don't think there's been quite enough coming back to me, and geeing me on, but I'm an adult'. 'But I'm an adult' seems to be echoed in Jean's remark, 'I think it's good to have someone who's stricter about deadlines but that's my own fault, I should have imposed that myself'.

'Someone else...on the course'

Tutors were of the mind that peer support from within the cohort could play a role in support and completion. This was particularly so when the cohort retained participants and was not subject to erosion and dropout thereby preserving wider networks of relationships (as for Cohort 1 as compared with Cohort 2).

I think they appreciated coming together as a group and talking through the issues with each other as well as with us (Cohort 1 Tutor: E).

I think perhaps the support they gave each other was quite important ...there was quite a lot of dialogue going on between the group about what stages they were at and what support there was (Cohort 1 Tutor: C)

Practitioners seemed to see things in a more complex way. Alison did not feel she got a lot of support and in response 'just got on and did it. I got friendly with someone else who was on the course and I think we kept each other going to be honest'. Relations between practitioners who were part of the project were interesting. Several appreciative points were made:

I was quite lucky in sort of forming a friendship with [other participant in cohort 1] who was the other part of the family support so we were able to phone each other up and keep in contact quite often (FG1)

... now and again we would get an email 'how's things going' from other people in the group and I thought that's, that was helpful to know that you weren't doing it on your own. (Alison)

But more often the comments, even when positive, were subtle and nuanced. Cohort membership was valued as much for its potential as for its activity – knowing ‘that you weren’t doing it on your own’. Thus a member of the first focus group valued the support of ‘my colleagues in the actual kind of research group as well. Although we didn’t come together a lot I think it was good to have other people who were dealing with a similar experience’. Alan made limited use of the opportunity.

I know that some of the other researchers were in touch with each other and found it helpful to be in touch but I didn’t really have a need for that. I mean I knew it was available and I could have picked up the phone or email my colleagues, so there was wee bits of that but I didn’t really find that there was a need to do that.

Jean said, ‘certainly met at the training sessions and that was very supportive, and we did talk about setting up other ones and then didn’t, and I don’t know why’. When asked if there was learning across the two cohorts, she was emphatic – ‘No, I think there could have been, there wasn’t.’ Shona put it down in part to geography.

It’s very difficult because I am quite distant from the rest of the cohort because I’m right up in the northeast, the others are all central belt ...as a group outside of the organized times that we’ve met I haven’t had any contact with them.

Practice colleagues

Project involvement had consequences for relations within the practitioner’s own team. The project relationship was sometimes seen as one of dependence.

All of our research topics involved us depending on other people in the organization giving a damn that we were doing it, listening to what we were doing, if they heard properly what we were doing and then selecting families that would be suitable for us to speak to. You know, none of us could have drawn on it purely from our caseloads. (FG1)

‘If they won’t cooperate I won’t be able to do it’ as a member of the second focus group expressed it. Enthusiastic colleagues could be invaluable, e.g. in identifying children and young people who could be part of a sample. Shona had found that the staff who worked in the practice project where she was undertaking her research had been ‘very supportive and very interested’. Gillian commented thoughtfully to the effect that she had asked the team for support and to ‘be part of it’ and they had all said yes. The project ‘would have been a positive for them’. It gave them ‘permission to say “this work is difficult”’, which is not always easy. It was ‘maybe the first time people had said this’. This had happened even though the project had not happened. This seems to be saying that the gains of distance and reflection were shared by the team members even though they were not doing the project and even though in this particular case it had not yet happened. If this is so, it may suggest that the early days of a project are important for facilitating change of ‘vision’ and standpoint within a team.

The agency managers perhaps saw any difficulties as connected with the structure of the local team. Practitioners could face particular difficulties freeing up their diaries if work-place settings offered limited possibilities for arranging cover or allowing released time. ‘Singleton’ positions,

where practitioners did not have the same opportunities as those co-located with fellow CHILDREN 1st colleagues, could present a particular challenge.

It is something that happens and it is something that comes up - in services where there are maybe two or three people doing the same job which we do have in certain parts of the country where the workload can be shared between them and so there is that little bit more flexibility (Learning and Development Coordinator).

Some practitioners experienced it rather differently. ‘They maybe thought I was swanning off for days to work at home and all the rest of it’ (FG1). Alison explained that

I would tell my line manager about it and I would tell the team every now and again about it, who would be ‘yeh, yeh, yeh’, but they weren’t really involved and it wasn’t as if I had people asking me all the time about how it was going and all that. So it was quite isolating to do it actually.

This may be connected with the cultural differences between the cohort group and the day-to-day practice environment. Gillian explicitly interpreted it in just those terms. ‘When I went back into the workplace it brought another set of priorities’ where ‘there isn’t that shared agenda and priorities change’. This will surface again when we discuss the research experience and reflect later on practitioner researchers as insiders and outsiders.

CHILDREN 1st and management

Members of the first cohort were especially appreciative of the commitment from senior management. Asked to identify key sources of support, group members named the Director, saying:

The Director, knowing - it’s a support and a pressure - knowing that there was no opt out clause it was kind of like having made a commitment to do the research and to complete it and that actually helped me get through it.

I felt [Service Director’s] very personal commitment to it so I kind of knew it wasn’t an option even almost if you like if you left the job.

The depth of commitment both given and expected is conveyed very strongly in these comments. It is likely that this would only work in an agency that is small enough for this sense of personal interest and naming of individuals. Shona referred more generally to this support in remarking ‘I felt very supported by Children 1st. There’s an interest in what I’m doing ... I feel there’s an interest in making sure that it’s a process that is OK for people’. There was, however, a hint from Cohort 2 members that this active engagement may have weakened a little over time. It is possible that ‘Head Office’ may not have appreciated the extent to which such engagement was valued. Jean recommended the appointment of ‘somebody who is both an experienced practitioner and experienced researcher to do input on that, somebody who’s made the switch from one to another’.

Management issues were more often referred to in connection with team management at project level. At this point there was an apparently puzzling ambiguity. Two extracts from Focus Group 2 serve to illustrate. A group member insisted,

certainly I see it that there is a management task in there from a CHILDREN 1st point of view, if we are committing to the programme then people need to be freed up to do it.

Yet she immediately went on to acknowledge

...And you know, I haven't asked my manager for it really because her... I suppose it is kind of chicken and egg because I know that I am retiring then I know that I just have to get through everything by a deadline

Another member followed this by saying,

I have said to her, you know, that I won't be able to do other things because I am doing the research. *You have said?* Yes, I have said. But they have been, well, they are kind of theoretical things. [laughter]

Both of these conversational turns are not self evident. In the first instance it may be that no matter how much the agency is seen as having responsibility to free people up, the claim is not made. This is perhaps because the project is not seen as part of 'work' - but something that you have to 'get through' under your own impetus. A senior manager recalled conversations with service managers where they reported having urged practitioners to clear their diaries 'and just actually said to them stop shilly shallying'. We will pick up these potentially important points again in the final section of the practitioner data. In the second extract perhaps the 'saying' is not 'said' because it is as if she thought the manager should 'manage' her work, but perhaps she believes she is arguing a moral position in the abstract ('theoretical') without any expectation that the real world will operate in line with the principle (the group laughter is perhaps a gesture of aligning themselves with the speaker).

The data from time to time has suggested possible differences between the two cohorts. Lesley actively reflected on and puzzled about this. 'I am very interested by the more help we've had the less we've been able to do it, I think that's an interesting research project in itself, I'm very interested in that.' At greater length she concluded,

That's really no excuse because the others, the interesting thing about the last cohort is they had less help, and they all achieved it, in time, most of them in time, and we've had more help and more meetings and more things. My colleague who did it keeps saying 'we didn't have that, we didn't get that'. They had very few books and we've been given lots of opportunity to get books, read and, interesting things.

This widely observed difference is intriguing and we are not confident we have fully understood it. Perhaps it was associated with senior managers having had a more energetic – and energising – involvement in the first cohort and this leading to a 'halo' effect such

that the organisation was saying yes, we really want people to complete this, these things and it's really important for people to keep to their deadlines and commitments, ...by and large, it didn't seem to be particularly negative and I think people accepted they needed a bit of encouragement along the way (Cohort 1 Tutor: B).

There is a strong tradition in organization research that observes the way first generation change may be associated with what the sociologist Max Weber called 'charismatic' leadership, whereas this may become formalised into embedded systems. Whatever the explanation, strong support systems do not, as such, guarantee progress.

The experience of practitioner research

The nature of practitioner research is something that emerges from the experience, rather than something that prescribes it in advance. It is only in the doing of practitioner research that the recurring questions take shape. How are the boundaries of practice and research, home and work, managed? Are practitioner researchers inside or outside the thing researched or evaluated? How do practitioner researchers manage time? What distinctive questions of research ethics are exposed? What aspects of the fieldwork experience characterize the projects? How do practitioners set about trying to make sense of data?

Time and boundaries

Probably the biggest challenge was just trying to make better use of my time. You know – time management (Alan)

The two things together – my whole work/life balance thing and add the research on top. I think you have to acknowledge that it does take time and an inordinate amount of willpower to make yourself sit down and do it. (Shona)

This was recognized by both tutors and agency managers.

(T)he kind of client group that they are working with and actually getting hold of people in the right circumstances and actually carrying out the interviews is more problematic. (Learning and Development Coordinator)

Time to allow practitioners to get on and complete their research was consistently mentioned by tutors as a potential barrier to completion, or a reason for stymieing progress.

For practitioners themselves, I think it was quite a challenge sort of taking that role on board and at some points they struggled with it and with trying to fit it in with their quite heavy, demanding jobs as well. (Cohort 1: Tutor C)

There was always a clear understanding that they were really stretched with their time anyway so you didn't really want to try and force that where it was just going to be a pressure really. (Cohort 1: Tutor E)

There was consensus but vagueness about the terms of the agreement that practitioners could spend time working on the projects at home. Furthermore,

while it was great having all that time to do work from home you still have to do your work so I found that quite a pressure because work still had to be done within time scales so it just meant you were busy, even busier the days you were there (FG1)

There was a perception among practitioners that, even in circumstances where employers are supportive, the research is always likely to be an extra. As Shona expressed it,

Trying to do this alongside the fulltime position that I've got, plus a very busy family life with lots of personal things going on at the same time...so neither work nor home was a place where I had a lot of time to commit.

Even when practitioners were reconciled to working on their projects in their own time, the consequences were risky. 'I didn't feel resentful about doing it in my own time. My wife did! But that is another story' (Alan). The only solution that seemed to be offered was to do better with the advantage of hindsight. 'If I was going to change anything about how I have done it I would have blocked out more time in my diary to have chunks of time' (Shona). But for some, even this did not seem feasible. This practitioner subsequently withdrew from the Project:

There is a bit of my line manager and a bit of me who has to manage my own work. And my discipline, well I don't know if it is discipline and I don't know how to do it. I am sure there are things that I could be doing but I just don't know what they are. (FG2)

Inside or outside?

Knowing whether something is 'inside' work or 'outside' work is closely linked to a frequently visited debate regarding the relative advantages for the researcher of being an insider or outsider. We come back to this issue in the closing part of the data. Sufficient for the moment to note that – while one or other position may be firmly espoused from time to time – practitioner researchers rarely hold consistently to either 'pure' view. They often seemed aware that others thought being a practitioner gave special added value. 'There is a concept of doing it as well. Of practitioners doing it. I think that is regarded well' (FG2). This surfaced when practitioners spoke of fieldwork and of later analysis, though there was rarely reflexive engagement with the ambiguities of their positions.

The children I am going to work with I know, have been in the family group meetings that I have co-ordinated, which is easier. ...I think that would be much easier than going into that blind with children that I don't know (FG2).

Alison reflected on the analysis and writing stages, and in doing so seemed to ally herself with the voice of 'people', yet recognize the probable inevitability of importing researcher categories of interpretation, and hence place herself partly on the 'outside'.

I tried to put as much wording in of what people had actually said because I thought that's what it is about – the views and listening to people.

When it came to it what I tried to look for is a theme – but it is quite difficult to because people speak in a different language, people use different words for different things.

The ‘practice puzzles’ that we mentioned earlier were typically expressed in ways that detach the practitioner from colleagues, as in the third person explanation that ‘My motivation was irritation with social workers’ (Lesley). But even when someone endeavours to be a researcher rather than a practitioner they may find it less than straightforward.

I think it’s been harder for me to be a researcher in terms of talking to children, I thought it wouldn’t be difficult but actually when I was listening to, thinking of one of the transcripts, oh my goodness, I have really gone right over the, ... I’m not this neutral encouraging person, I’m much more acting as a practitioner. (Jean)

Our own position is that the criteria for good practitioner research are broadly similar to those for good university research (Shaw and Norton, 2008), yet its distinctive mix of contexts and purposes challenge the conventional wisdom of both academics and practitioners.

Sorting out ethics

Obtaining ethical review during the research process was seen as a particular difficulty for the second cohort. The first cohort had been subject to a more informal ethical review process whereby tutors reviewed the ethical implications of study designs. The programme was not accredited for the first cohort but due to an expressed interest by its participants the University staff worked towards getting the programme accredited for the second cohort. This involved some administrative changes in the running of the programme, with a requirement that all participants submit their research proposals to the University Ethics Committee for approval. This meant significant delay and frustration for practitioners and tutors alike:

Well, it is partly because their timescales just don’t fit in with student-practitioners needing to do things quickly in a way (Cohort 1 Tutor: B).

I don’t think it [the university ethics procedure] is geared up for a project like this [a] very small scale projects but linked to the university with university staff as supervisors (Cohort 2 Tutor: A)

Yet no-one in the second cohort felt they had a clear grasp of the principles and requirements. For Shona, ‘nobody came back to me at any point and said there is a problem with this. I just got stuck in and got on with it’. For Alison, ‘it took a while. There were a few changes but not major changes. It just seemed it was a bit of a slow process’. Yet for others decisions regarding ethics were something of a mystery. Lesley concluded ‘I think I had to abandon the children thing, more because of the confidentiality, which I do think we all get terribly confused about’. A participant in the Cohort 2 focus group, when asked if s/he had to go to an ethics committee, replied in a way characteristic of most, ‘Well maybe not as it is social workers and coordinators and not families (*interjection* - “*and it’s not children*”) – well that is where I am at’.

The delay in the work of Cohort 2 was thought by Lesley to be due in part to failures of understanding on the part of the ethics committee, yet once more was expressed uncertainly. ‘My understanding is that something was said to the ethics committee which made them really view practitioner research in a different light. I don’t know if that’s true, real information’.

*Doing fieldwork*⁸

We noted above that Jean’s inspection of her transcripts led her to conclude that her research interviewing skills were not to be taken for granted – ‘I’m not this neutral encouraging person, I’m much more acting as a practitioner’. This poses the interesting possibility that the experience had served to challenge an assumption that social workers know how to do interviews, and therefore can do research interviewing. Expressed more generally, even the most apparently self evident points of connection between practice and research may prove slippery. This may be complicated by little noticed consequences of career development, whereby seniority leads to loss of core activity of this kind. Two different practitioners are speaking in the following instances:

I feel a bit anxious about getting back out and speaking to the old children, which I haven’t done that for maybe four years on a regular basis. That’ll be a bit strange. (FG2)

That will be a challenge for me – interviewing children. I haven’t done direct work for quite a long time. (FG2)

The very skill with which social workers are assumed to be at ease - interviewing – becomes a source of uncertainty for some when undertaking practitioner research. This is not likely, however, to discourage practitioner researchers from seeking to handle such uncertainty by opting for forms of research that seem akin to activities with which they are familiar. Alison illustrated this explicitly in her account of, first, her choice of data collection methods, and second, a cluster of linked decisions about eliciting and recording her data.

I did semi-structured interviews because I felt like it was a bit like people speaking

... and I did try to do it with a tape recorder but the first person wasn’t really keen and when I tried to show her that you know it was really intimidating I think it managed to switch itself off so in the end I was thinking well I don’t think this is actually working because people weren’t keen on it and sometimes when you went into people’s houses they had the telly on or their kids were running about so I felt like... well I ended up writing notes but I am used to doing that

In both cases she appears to be resorting to familiar modes of professional practice to ease her research – ‘a bit like people speaking’ and ‘I am used to doing that’. Strategies of this kind may be linked to a widely held view that practitioner research is not easy. Indeed, Alison goes on to reflect that it required hard work to ‘keep going’. ‘It took quite a lot of energy, I have to say, to keep going and saying... but you don’t like to keep going and prodding people or asking people’. It is noticeable in the second quotation from Alison that it leads her to research practices that

⁸ We are aware that ‘fieldwork’ is a term that is used by both practitioners and researchers, but with different activities in view.

would in most university research be assumed to lead to thin data records. We return to the related question of technology below.

Yet this rather downbeat picture of practitioner research is far from complete. There were various occasions of practitioners speaking of their fieldwork in ways that suggest it opened fresh and ‘inspirational’ visions of the possibilities of such work, and drew them into what qualitative researchers have described as a research ‘gaze’. Believing this to be significant, we have included several examples.

...the interviews, I really enjoyed it and I was quite motivated. I mean in the interview, you can tell, gosh, I am getting lots of good stuff here and this is really what the research is about. And I was aware of that at the time, so, I quite anticipated that quite eagerly – sitting down with all the transcriptions and went through it with all the themes and highlighter pens. So, I quite enjoyed all that actually, difficult, I mean it is a lot to keep in your head but no I did really enjoy it and picking out quotes. I think that is, I mean the interviews, the fathers own words were so powerful and evocative that I really wanted to capture their views (Alan)

I’ve really enjoyed doing the interviews I’ve done, it’s been fascinating ...when I’ve done them I’ve been really quite inspired, must get on to the next one, but then the mechanics of setting up the next one get in the way. (Jean)

...kind of stressful. Not easy at all alongside your own work. But I was determined by that point. I think the interviews were quite inspirational to me and I am really going to see that through (Alan)

The sense of discovery comes through – ‘this is really what the research is about’ – with the newly minted fascination that research practice has the potential to yield understanding and insight that often escapes day to day practice. On occasion this seems almost like a window into the truth about the world of service users, with all its potential to unsettle and lose control, that the forms of talk in routine practice may not yield.

And I had a much more structured interview, er, questionnaire, and I was persuaded to have it much more open and I am anxious about that because... I feel like I might lose control of what people say in that way and I think, actually, no that is what you do in planned meetings really... you are asking open questions and gathering information from them, not really questions, just what they are saying... I don’t know, I just feel a bit... eh, the truth... (FG2)

It may be understandable that practitioner researcher sometimes feel that they have been drawn into a different culture from their immediate colleagues, which is not always easy to share. This was expressed by someone from the first cohort focus group:

I don’t know what I shared with the team. I think the only time that they were aware of me - I would say I’m taking time off to do my research in the planning stages - and then

they were really aware when I was interviewing children and young people because they were either coming to the centre or I was going to see them.

Practitioner research may differ from mainstream academic research in that it is marked by varying visibility. Fieldwork and planning - actions that require visible, 'relational' work – may be noticed by colleagues, where more solitary thinking work for developing proposals, research designs, analysis and writing may pass unnoticed by colleagues whose work may not entail experience of such activities.

Dealing with 'thingies'

Practitioner research supported at agency level is likely to focus attention on the general adequacy of agency-wide IT systems. Limitations in the CHILDREN 1st resources were noted especially by people in the first cohort.

you had to sort of put everybody's name in your e-mails and send it round rather than just post it somewhere for everybody to sort of look in, which probably would have been sort of more useful where you could go to somewhere on the website or internet or something (FG1)

I suppose that would have been helpful to have had that conversation quite early on with CHILDREN 1st managers – 'what support can we get in terms of technology?' I think ... the tutors were talking about quite expensive technology that we didn't have a budget for in our projects (Alan)

While this was nowhere expressed as a 'heavy' criticism, it was perhaps compounded by limited IT skills among some cohort members. 'The IT bit of it...was quite a challenge for me'. 'I get really confused with the editing software with these machines'. This may have led to interpretation of tutors' advice in ways that avoided tackling the underlying issue. The following interchange between three participants in the second cohort focus group illustrates how this might happen.

Lesley: Can I just add one thing - I am slightly worried about technology. I mean I still don't know about where we get a thingy...

Lorna: [Service Director] has one if you want one.

Lesley:and I am just confused.

Jean: Well let you tell you my advice was well don't - don't record them. Now, let me think who told me this. We could check with... X, because the advice was that it takes hours to transcribe and that for our kind of interview that, because the samples are really small, it is probably better to and easier to not transcribe it

As with the decisions about fieldwork methods, this problem may sometimes be resolved by opting for ways of working that seemed akin to familiar professional modes.

I didn't come along with technology that they weren't familiar with. I mean they would be quite familiar with someone sitting in front of them with a wee notepad and just taking notes. I mean that is what I do normally and that probably made it a bit more amenable to visiting them at home. (Alan)

However, while the utilization of technology was in general a weak aspect of the project, there were glimpses of serendipitous gains from involvement in practitioner research. For example, while Alan seems to have avoided audio taping interviews, he referred on several occasions to the 'transferable skills' that had come with involvement in his project.

I did a lot of at home. I had just been given a computer. My brother in law had given me a computer. So it was one of the benefits of the research for me, it actually developed my IT skills. Not at any high level [*laughs*] I am still at a basic level, but in terms of where I was starting from it helped me develop a familiarity with Word and keyboard skills.

Making sense of it all

Making analytic sense of the data and writing form the final phase of the direct research experience. While Project practitioners could with some plausibility claim familiarity with the modes of data collection chosen for their projects, the idea of data analysis and research writing were less easy to slot back into known professional modes. For this reason, the linked processes of analysis and writing posed initial perplexity for some, summed up by one member of the Cohort 2 focus group in the words, 'That is exactly my anxiety...How do you formulate the findings?' Alison and Lesley each express the thought more fully.

I suppose I thought, 'What do I do with that?' You know, just being practical about myself but how would I analyse that, you know, if I got all this information. (Alison)

One of the things I think you have to have as a researcher is a tidy brain, and I don't really have a tidy brain. I think you researchers probably do have that, and so I think 'oh Lord, what do I do with all this information?' (Lesley)

A minor theme running through our evaluation of the projects has been the recognition of the diversity of skills that are entailed, and the risks of being simplistic if practitioner research is treated in an undifferentiated way. Jean reflects the significance of this for analysing and writing.

I just went to the library and read, and thought this is wonderful, that was so refreshing, that would be good as well and I have really enjoyed doing that, but it's then put it down on paper, doing the actual reading has been extremely interesting.

Practitioners responded to the challenge of analysis and writing in different ways. We noted earlier the comment of one person regarding tutor feedback, that 'I loved waiting to see what would come back'. Yet for another person in the same focus group the feedback, though helpful, posed new challenges about what s/he called 'my personal style of communicating'. 'Well I found the help from [tutor] invaluable but what was coming back was more jargonistic and formal language that I would normally use.'

‘Jargon’ is, of course, a kind of distancing swearword, typically used of others and not of oneself. Distancing of this kind immersed elsewhere in the Project. Lesley, for example, seems to complain about writing expectations when she says, ‘I can’t be bothered with these bits and pieces. I think why on earth would I have to put that in. Get on with it, this is the answers, these are the findings - but I feel I have to put much more’.

But she and others had a capacity to be more reflective. Occasionally practitioners seemed to believe that research demanded facts rather than judgement, or ‘essay mode’ – ‘just stick to facts, what you’ve heard and that’s it. Not opinion, not anything’ (FG1). But others immersed themselves in the process of analysing and writing. This may be reflected in appreciation of the process of transcription:

I have taped interviews, I have typed them up, I can type quite well, possibly could have got someone to type them but I quite liked doing that actually because you’ve heard what’s being said, and also you remember bits and pieces of what you’ve written down, ‘she cried over this’ (Lesley)

Or of identifying analytic themes:

I kind of think that almost while I was interviewing, right at the start even, you start to get pictures in your head of trends that are coming through and so some of that I think analysis goes on all the way through... There are starting to be things I can tie together from the different sets of data, that maybe are upholding each other, it’s quite interesting. (Shona)

Consequences and outcomes

Making sense of data and developing writing forms that adequately reflect the nature of practitioner research lead on to consideration of the consequences, ‘impacts’ and outcomes of practitioner research. For example, an academic writing voice may presume an academic audience.

Just to me the kind of pulling together of the research feels so *academic*, and I know it’s an academic process but when your work has involved, when the substance is the words of children, it just feels like *who* is the audience anyway. (FG1)

Indeed, uncertainty regarding audience was the strongest theme to emerge from the focus groups and interviews. Understandably, this stemmed largely from members of the first cohort, whose projects had been completed some time before this evaluation. ‘It’s nearly two years, well...more like a year and a half, and it’s not...’ (Alan). This was felt quite deeply by those who raised the issue.

You came to the training days and [Service Director] would sort of come along or whatever but then you never heard from anybody sort of from that and then and still you

don't even sort of hear anything about it. Because I've not got back from [name] my document that I just need to check that she's done it and it's now a year later and I think it's going to get bound and published or whatever happens to it. (FG1)⁹

This lament illustrates how the perceived silence of the agency may be associated with practitioner researchers feeling muted, such that they are left not knowing either what is planned or what to say. This seemed to have percolated through to the second cohort, as suggested by this conversational turn in the focus group.

So yes, there's plenty of ways of disseminating.

It's just somebody's got to do it

The consequences of this for the identity and morale of the practitioner researchers may have been underestimated by the agency.

I have to be honest that my colleague read the study but I don't know what sense she made of it, I didn't really get any feedback from it. Had I been in that position I would have given some feedback. (Alan)

Well it might have had an impact, and the only way that it would have had that is if someone from the wider network at our presentation took something away ... We have no idea or indication of that (FG1)

Silence may of course prompt relatively inexperienced researchers to conclude that their work *really* had no value. This may possibly be reinforced by a strong awareness that the Project had value and significance for CHILDREN 1st. Asked about the impact of the initiative an interesting exchange took place in the first cohort focus group around a nice distinction between programme and research projects.

A: I think the impact of the programme and the impact of the research is not the same.

[*Murmurs of agreement*]

A: The impact of the research, I don't know if it has impacted

B: I've no idea, absolutely no idea.

A: It's the programme that people are talking about and running with and...

B: The actual pieces of things - I've no idea

The risk here is that, no doubt unintentionally, the agency may be seen as acting in its corporate interests rather than valuing individual practitioners. A third member of the focus group responded to the exchange above by making this point.

C: Well they've clearly got awfully excited. They like having the research done. I think it's true that the research programme has had an impact. The research findings, there's less evidence. They're going to put it through ... for a care accolade. They are!

⁹ This comment was made in early 2008 and may predate the dissemination of the completed reports.

They're really very excited about it. That's not the individual pieces of research. It's the fact that as an organisation they have this link with the universities and they do research. So at a high level it's loved, it's ticked some kind of learning and development box, it has. [B: Investors in people] I think, with a passion. (FG1)

This area was one that raised some of the more negative responses to the Project. This was probably accentuated by the fact that for at least some of the participants, their projects *had* delivered new understandings for their practice – the strong initial motivation we noted earlier in the report. An example from each cohort will serve to make the point. Lesley had a long practice career behind her, yet by seeing the world from the child's position had yielded new practice lessons about family plans.

One of the things I learnt was that children don't think of it as being called a plan. That's been very learning for me in other things. When you say to kids 'make a plan', children don't have a concept of a plan, so that was quite interesting.

Alan's research had made a direct change to his practice in a small but significant way.

So you feel it has influenced your practice then?

Alan: Definitely... I know if I've got two phone numbers I will phone in no particular order whereas before I ... would make contact with the mother – it's not necessarily a gender thing but more who has the children, but actually you know ... it is really quite important for fathers to be contacted not as an afterthought but as an early stage in the process. So, that has changed my practice.

A practitioner research network

What difference did it make that the projects and practitioners were part of a planned Project network? We have said much about this throughout the report, in particular in the sections on how research topics were decided, the support network, and the outcomes and consequences of the projects. In this final strand of the warp of the initiative – running vertically down through time – we focus primarily on the response of the practitioners to the realisation that they were part of a larger Project.

The wider agency interests were perhaps not initially appreciated by practitioners.

I didn't know just what a big deal it was for the organisation. I didn't know how unique it perhaps was or innovative which clearly it is because you're sitting doing some research on the effectiveness of it. (FG1)

While practitioners were perhaps in the dark, the same was thought to be true for the agency.

...for the organisation that maybe just evolved over a period of time. You know, we're saying *we* took on something we maybe weren't really sure what it was about, but maybe

they took on something they didn't know what it was and for them it kind of gradually grew and grew arms and legs as it went along and we kind of experienced that. (FG1)

Members of the first cohort suspected that those in the second cohort may have a different experience due to 'bits that are maybe much more set in place that weren't in place when we did it'. We have suggested previously that some elements of lesson learning may have been evident.

There was a bit of a hoo haa in the beginning about whether people could choose their own subjectsWe who had applied had no idea about what the criteria was and that was quite irritating. That's been resolved this time. (FG2)

But agency sponsored research networks are always likely to present a tension about who makes decisions regarding research questions. This surfaced several times in a rather different way. Lorna expressed the problem in the following way.

I was interested in fathers as well, but then there had been one the previous year about involving fathers, so I ended up choosing one about conflict in families, parental arguments, yes, which seemed highly relevant. With hindsight I wish I'd never picked it, anyway.

This issue about boundaries and knowledge territories was probably important, and at least as much so as the more visible debate about freedom of choice for topics.

I was going to work with possible Midlothian which is nearest to me and also Fife was the other place I was going to use but then Fife started doing their own research on plans so that kind of scuppered that. [*yeh*] It was too complicated to have two different bits of research. And then I decided to, I suppose the discussion was with X, the tutor, to broaden it into children and families. (FG2)

The boundary problem not only limited the feasibility of project choices, but also had constraining influences on subsequent fieldwork. Jean remarked that 'there were others doing research in a different area but also using the same... Well, one other who was doing that, potential, a few of the children were then not available'. The sense of 'crowding' also came to the fore in occasional comments on the implications of the Project for the agency's core task. One member of the first cohort focus group remarked 'I think having eight people actively out there trying to do research was a burden on the children and family services', although s/he immediately went on to express the view that 'I'm not aware that any other part of the corporate organisation had any impact whatsoever'. None of these boundary issues are likely to figure so prominently in cases where practitioners are undertaking lone projects.

Finally, there are significant consequences of a networked project for practitioners as cohort members. We have noted several times the limited extent to which either and both cohort worked as a whole. Shona's remark that 'It's hard for me to speak for the cohort as a whole because as I say I don't have a lot of contact with the others' could have been spoken by perhaps the majority. We explored the nature and reasons for this in the section on support. It may seem puzzling that

someone in the first cohort could say, without any group dissent, 'I don't know anyone who's doing the programme now so you don't know if it's exactly the same as we got' (FG1).

However, there were influential group norms that played a strong part in how projects developed. We referred earlier to the way that cohort peers provided a support that was as much valued for its potential as for its actual operation. We believe that networked Projects of this kind are likely to develop group norms that may work for good or ill. The complex nuances of this are captured powerfully in this contribution to the first cohort focus group.

...the group, the potential I think was there and I didn't use it and that was fear I think if you like because and guilt because you would come up to a training day and you know at the last one you were so motivated and inspired and by the next one you were going to have done this that and the next thing and then the training day loomed and I hadn't done any of it and I was frightened to phone other people because I didn't want to know that you had all done it and I was the only one that hadn't. (FG1)

These implicit norms were more often expressed implicitly, as in this aside in the second cohort focus group: 'I think I was a bit behind at the beginning and I panicked then, but I am now up to...' Jean also tacitly compared herself negatively with her peers in saying 'I'm disappointed with myself about it...because I'm very much further behind than...' Practitioners are perhaps likely to regard themselves as individually accountable for their perceived slow progress rather than look to system-wide factors, and also perhaps to be too pessimistic about their relative progress in the group.

The Cross-weave of Practitioner Research

We have found persuasive evidence from the evaluation of the Project that practitioner research offers a form of work that brings together and contains different career-life concerns that otherwise may remain scattered. When this is facilitated by an employing agency the significance of the work becomes part of the collective identity of the agency as well as personal to the practitioners involved. In this next part of the report we want to embody this through an illustration of seven interconnected themes that we believe are likely to emerge in any networked Project of this kind, and which have importance beyond local research and for a reflective social work practice. We summarise these in the form of propositions.

- Practitioner researchers engage with a language and culture that is strange yet potentially rewarding for practice and research. They find themselves located in a culture that lies between ‘practice’ and ‘research’ but is fundamentally shaped by and challenges both.
- Practitioner researchers are typically engaged in negotiating an uncertain world, which is at its heart an effort to learn what it’s about.
- Practitioner research prompts a fruitful re-engagement with professional memories, which has the potential to develop future professional identities.
- The location of practitioner research as lying both within and outside of core professional work poses difficult challenges of moral accountability for their work within their practice cultures.
- Involvement in practitioner research stirs reflection on the meaning and value of professional work. For some practitioners this may be overly demanding in the context of the perceived constraints of their core work.
- Networked Projects inevitably raise questions of ownership.
- The nature of practitioner research is something that emerges from the experience, rather than something that prescribes it in advance. It is only in the doing of practitioner research that its critical identity takes shape.

Language and culture

‘People speak in a different language, people use different words for different things’. Alison probably did not invest these words with the scope we have in mind, but they depict well the fluid way in which practitioner researchers inevitably move between the language cultures of academic researchers, fellow practitioners, and service users. What hitherto seemed familiar and obvious sometimes becomes strange, puzzling and exciting. We saw this in the responses of some practitioners to the experience of doing fieldwork, with their discovery that ‘this is really what ... research is about’, and with the fascination that research practice has the potential to yield understanding and insight that often escapes day to day practice. One person drew the conclusion ‘that you’ve got to be passionate about something to research it’ (FG1). The awareness of entering a new language culture was perhaps expressed most fully and appreciatively by Shona.

It’s something that I haven’t ever done before, so to be able to talk about, undertaking a piece of research or a study in this way, I quite like that, I quite like to be learning new

things and we talked before about the language, the process and that was all new to me, and then being able to see it through and I'm quite excited at this point in time about getting it written and completed and that's about a sense of achievement for me.

It is worth recalling that perhaps all of the participating practitioners came into the Project with little or no conscious recall of previous knowledge, experience or expertise in research. These personal histories – albeit, as we will shortly see, susceptible to reconstruction – proved two-edged. The discovery of a new language community may entice or put off; entry may prove enduring or, more often fragile. There were numerous instances of practitioners recalling or representing these cultural processes. Alison was explaining to the interviewer how she had worked through thinking of a question and objectives, her aims and how she was going to do it, and broke off to ask 'Does that sound the terminology?' Passing hesitations over terms and language typify the ease with which cultural membership is lost. These practitioners are reaching for and recalling an elusive language

You had to actually sit down and think of a question and then write a... what do you call it? A proposal about it. (FG1)

What's it called the shorter version of the actual report? Executive Summary. (FG1)

I can't remember all the terminology as you quickly get out of the way of thinking. One was an interview schedule. I called it a questionnaire but [*tutor*] set me right, and said 'Well, it is an interview'. (Alan)

Like, what does, I forget the, yeh, what does a consent form look like? (FG2)

We noted earlier Gillian's awareness that returning from training sessions to her workplace was a movement from one cultural location to another. Reading about 'some of the terminology and things' led in Shona's case to a relative comfort in her new language. 'I think I use it more comfortably than I did, I know it means a particular thing'. She experienced this as quite different from previous engagement with the university world, and as something that included an egalitarian conversation so that, speaking of tutor-feedback, she reflected 'somehow there's an atmosphere of it not being, doing an essay for child protection or something. I haven't felt that at all'.

Several practitioners understood this as entailing an acquired way of thinking, a research 'gaze' which provided a position from which to look at practice in a new way, with new understandings that made old assumptions implausible, as for Lorna who thought 'that sounds stupid but I hadn't quite clocked just how much that was the case'. Yet for others, 'looking back, that has been a block for me and I've conformed to it' (FG1).

Just getting an idea of what sort of... I dunno, well, an idea of what a research project looked like (FG2)

I suppose it was something like that that was the motivation... having the opportunity to step back a bit and look at something in the way you don't have time to do and in a disciplined way (FG2)

Similarly for Alan, acquiring a research gaze

Definitely helped me to get inside the mind of some of the...service users and fathers in particular – to see things from their perspective. It was a real insight. You know – their quotes, as I say, were very honest and to the point and some of it was very hard to hear.

At its most powerful practitioners saw this as placing them at the behest of the evidence, whatever it might be saying, in a way that almost frightened them. Lesley expressed this most strongly, when she picked up the word 'objective' to talk to other members of the focus group as a way of expressing what she had in mind . She defined objective as

Taking on board what people say and wanting them to say something else. I think that frightens me a little bit. *So being objective in what way – what do you mean?* Well – I just, to hear what people say, and to transcribe it and then use that information and not skew say with things that I want to hear. So I think I have to just be aware of that. That one is a bit...¹⁰

Negotiating uncertainty

Something as potentially powerful as a new culture and language will perhaps inevitably entail uncertainty, and the growth of new realizations. We mentioned earlier that practitioners may need to learn new rules of engagement in working with tutors. Likewise with fieldwork practice. When we noted Alison's comment that 'I tried to put as much wording in of what people had actually said because I thought that's what it is about' we are hearing someone endeavouring to identify the essential nature of practitioner research. This sometimes seems to entail encountering the limitations of rules regarding standardisation, sampling, generalization and the like.

The bit I wonder about is have you ever had a semi-structured interview and you go off on a tangent because it is interesting – do you have to do the same with all of them? Because you could end up with 5 totally different interviews, so I am a bit confused about that. (FG2)

This will occasionally lead practitioners into new aspirations, which in turn pose questions of the responsibilities of sponsoring agencies to recognize the career consequences of practitioner research.

It's opened up a whole range of things that I've never done before and so I would like to pursue maybe ways of combining the two, if that is possible, in a more proactive way, I don't know if that's about, I don't know how even to go about that. (Shona)

¹⁰ We heard Lesley speaking about this earlier when she concluded 'I don't know, I just feel a bit...eh, the truth'.

This runs counter to much of the literature about practitioner research, which presents it as a slimmed down, instrumental novice-practice that is best tackled by learning simple rules for research. Our own view is that the uncertainty of practitioners is not down simply to ignorance or lack of skills, but is at least as much an endemic feature of a research practice that sits creatively but uncomfortably between the established cultures of research and professional practice.

Professional memories and identities

The transformative potential of practitioner research should not be over estimated. We were struck by the frequency with which those to whom we spoke were engaged in actively remembering. In perhaps the majority of cases this revealed an imperfect grasp of the details of their own project. In the case of Alison, it may also imply that she does not have a sense of completely owning the title.

I am trying to think how it was actually titled in the end... yes, it was substance misusing... Substance misusing parents views of support. I think that's what it was (Alison)

My research project is, if I can remember what it is, is about conflict, parental conflict in families (FG2)

In other cases the act of remembering seemed to prompt a reflective new awareness that research interests had played an ongoing if subterranean part in their careers. Speaking of her own career and knowledge of research, Alison concluded, 'Well, I didn't think I really had until I started to talk [*laughs*] "Oh yeh, and I've done that"'. Likewise Gillian suggested several possible half forgotten ways in which she had been associated with the world of research, and speculated about having research involvement and subsequently 'seeing' research issues. 'It's really strange. I wonder if it's like you buy a red car and you see red cars'. Several practitioners were ready to reflect with Jean that 'I suppose in my head I've always been interested in research'.

Accountability

In drawing together the evaluation findings regarding the significance of a network Project, we highlighted the importance of group norms. In most instances this was brought up in the context of practitioners' feelings of accountability for their project. The existence of group frames of reference also cropped up in discussing the relationship of practitioners to their practice colleagues outside the cohort. In all, the moral tone was loud. We spoke to one person who had withdrawn from the Project. The difficulties that were beyond her control left her saying 'It was hanging over me'. 'I had never failed to complete something'. She was 'giving myself a hard time' because 'it was something I wanted to do' – something that would have been 'good for me, good for the organization'. Even when at the instigation of the agency the project was closed, she said that a line had not been drawn under it. 'It relieved me' but 'from my point of view...I would still want to complete that work'.

Jean felt bad that she was at risk of 'squandering' her opportunity. Others were scrupulously sensitive to the use of time. The following comments were made in the first cohort focus group:

I kind of felt when I was doing the actual interviews that that was set around time that was convenient for children and young people but at other times I could, I felt - you know people - "you're doing your research again". Well it kind of felt like skiving to take too much time off.

And obviously, I felt my colleagues, there was that kind of sense that I feel like I'm skiving.

They maybe thought I was swanning off for days to work from home and all the rest of it.

The express support of managers and colleagues helped in this regard, but needed *saying*.

My manager and my colleagues were supportive and aware of what I was doing, you know, so that helped in that if I disappeared for a day and a half and said working from home they knew that what I was up to, that I wasn't skiving off and not doing my fair share of the project. (Alan)

Social workers who, by their own standards, fell behind were unlikely to be forgiving of themselves.

It's no excuse for me, he's as busy as I am. *Have there been advantages taking part?* It doesn't feel like it at the moment, it just feels like a millstone to be honest (Lesley)

Meaning and value

Participants had much to say on the themes of the worth, meaning and value of the Project, and we reflect this is the space that we give to this evidence in the following paragraphs.

'It's a fantastic opportunity, it's a great thing'. 'It lost meaning for what it was about'. Both these remarks were made by practitioners who had completed their projects as part of the first cohort. In the main it should be said that the depth of disappointment was only possible because of the counterbalancing depth of appreciation. The Project was something in which large hopes had been invested. The final appraisals were unanimously positive if diverse - 'interesting', 'difficult', 'stretching'.

I found it really, really interesting and I'm just completing it having gone off and had a baby in the middle of between starting it and things so...but it has been really worthwhile

I found it really interesting and at times I couldn't see it far enough but it was really good, once it was finished!

Once it was all finished and it came together it was a worthwhile experience. (FG1)

It's a fantastic opportunity, it's a great thing, a lot of people in other organisations would dearly love to do something like that. (Jean)

This positive message should not be underestimated. The same focus group had the following exchange.

- C: I think we have been lucky that CHILDREN 1st invested in doing it and gave us the opportunity to do it
A: We have been lucky
D: I also think, despite my moaning, the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages, it's not something I regret doing
A: So glad I did it
D: Yes absolutely. In the main, it's been positive
B: We have focused on challenges and learning and things but I would agree that, you know, looking back I would do things differently but I'm still glad that I did it.

Tutors and agency managers had quite a lot to say about how they saw the value of the Project, and it may help if we disentangle this and observe the different ways in which they saw the Project having value for practitioners, tutors, and organizations.

For practitioners

Perceived benefits included the opportunity to develop practitioner research experience and research skills; direct changes to practice; and the transferability of skills. First, the initiative was seen as important for developing practitioners' research and allied skill sets:

Well I guess for the practitioners – it was just a whole new experience and it gave them a bit of an insight into research and the kinds of things that they could find out (Cohort 1 Tutor: E).

...it has enabled practitioners to become more research minded and to be thinking about how they can gather evidence about what is going on (Cohort 1 Tutor: B).

This consideration is perhaps – at the time of writing at least – not uniform across both Cohorts:

the first cohort seemed to go very well indeed, was very satisfying process for I suppose virtually all concerned, the second cohort ... has been slower and more problematic in various ways (Cohort 1 Tutor: B).

There was broader skills development for practitioners, including for example knowledge of how to make formal presentations as well as core research skills and understanding.

Second, regarding impacts on practice there was the suggestion that such practitioner projects began a process of ensuring feedback and practice consideration that hitherto was not always well developed in the organisation:

it is good to have feedback on practice on what we do... that even bad messages or bad news can be good news because you do something about it which is good...(Services Director).

There was also the belief that benefits and impacts were experienced by the wider teams and social work colleagues:

...they had increased empathy which then with their standpoint and experiences, which then led to changes in practice and that had been mostly that people in the team had recognised that. So they had become proselytizers if you like for a particular change in practice (Services Director).

A specific example of a project was given to illustrate how project findings had influenced practice. The 'Engaging with Fathers project' had led to suggestions that fathers often felt peripheral because they were contacted by professionals far later than the mother or other primary carers:

So now his pledge was never to do that and to always involve the father and of course that has impacted on the whole team practice and now it has impacting on our practice overall – and that learning has gone across the agency... (Services Director).

One tutor raised the example of wider dissemination of a project.

I heard something on the news where they cited one of the pieces of research from it and on my way into work one morning I was over the moon, and that that voice is now informing. It's just a little news piece on radio Scotland but still it's, still it was coming to fruition (Cohort 2 Tutor: FG, L)¹¹.

Third, the Project introduced practitioners to processes and skills that were transferable skills and which enabled them to examine practice through another lens:

perhaps take a sort of overview of things that were happening in their everyday practice through being able to look in- depth at one particular issue– it gave them sort of a way of standing back from it I suppose (Cohort 1 Tutor: C).

about practitioners having the chance to reflect in a slightly different way... if they are looking at their practice from a slightly different perspective then hopefully it will be incredible useful (Cohort 2 Tutor: A).

raised [...] practitioners' own understanding of their work and kind of, I suppose it's, esteem about their practice... become more critical to not just do things just because we have always done them but actually to begin to question things (Services Director).

For tutors

It proved an interesting consequence of the Project that tutors – those who could be viewed as the 'service providers' in the Project – had important things to say about themselves as beneficiaries. For example, tutors suggested their own delivery of teaching and support had encouraged them to reflect critically on best practice:

¹¹ We have not tried to check what this may refer to, or if it was accurate.

Well I suppose it makes you look in detail at your own practice and you know when you are explaining it to others (Cohort 1 Tutor: C).

It's improved my practice in relation to supervision (Cohort 2 Tutor: D).

There was the view that participating helped bridge a perceived academic-practice gap. It enabled experienced practitioners now based within University settings to be reinvigorated about practice and to maintain stronger connections between the university and the 'grass-roots':

as you become more senior you move further away from practice.. the smallness of the scale of the project makes it feel closer [to] practice than a national or major research project (Cohort 2 Tutor: A).

There was also a suggestion of the benefits arising from individual practitioner projects in terms of finding which could be integrated into existing stocks of knowledge to:

add to our knowledge base. So in terms of that theory and practice or research and practice [benefits]t goes the other way too (Cohort 2 Tutor: D).

Tutors were keen to stress how much they enjoyed being involved in the Project and tutoring individual projects and the benefits this accrued. It was experienced as a rewarding one to one ongoing relationship that allowed them to witness development of confidence and see progression from beginning to end:

So it is nice to see them with a sense of excitement and to see them actually pull off something which they often kind of doubted they would do right at the beginning. So that is very kind of satisfying and is keeping me in touch with practice ...

(Cohort 1 Tutor: B).

...I think it was just the enthusiasm that they showed and the commitment that they showed, and you know it is in that sense that you feel like you are achieving something because you are supporting someone developing their own skills and their own knowledge

(Cohort 1 Tutor: C)

I decided it was my choice if I put more time in that I was contracted for as I found it quite a rewarding experience as well. So there is a kind of exchange happening there – it is not just a monetary one.

(Cohort 1 Tutor: C)

I think, probably, like with most things. I think it was a good idea and I think that people gained from it on both sides

(Cohort 1 Tutor: E)

For the organization

Benefits were identified for both CHILDREN 1st and the academics such as consolidating relationships between University academics and CHILDREN 1st so that continued exchanges may result:

consolidating those bonds between particular[University] researchers and [CHILDREN 1st] that they could draw upon at times that they wanted a certain kind of knowledge I guess. (Cohort 1 Tutor: C)

it has certainly helped to meet our aim about having better links with academic teaching and also a bit about impacting on how teaching is done (Services Director).

For both organisations that participated (University and CHILDREN 1st) there were perceived internal benefits derived from the Project in terms of greater communication and collegiality:

I think it adds a bit to collegiality [amongst tutors] as well (Cohort 1 Tutor: B).

It has increased again my knowledge base in terms of the diversity of what we do. It has enabled me to get to know some of our key practitioner staff a lot better than I did already...I have established much stronger working relationships with some of the people in this programme through that (Learning and Development Coordinator).

The agency identified wider external benefits that the Project has given them such as greater credibility in academic and policy-making settings and the ability to contribute towards a broader vision of social work:

this is an organisation that doesn't just do it thinks and it researches and it builds that research on our practical experience with the client group that we work with
(Learning and Development Coordinator).

It has presented a model I think, it is something we have given to social work in Scotland
(Services Director).

I don't think we could claim to be world leaders in this area but we are learners and we are active and interested learners and I think that we've moved on hugely since we started it
(Learning and Development Coordinator).

Benefits were also identified around the development of a broader learning culture within the organisation, and the ability to be self critical:

Hopefully more informed practice that has been informed by research – however small and hopefully that will improve the learning culture ... and empowering practitioners to have a voice and to have that voice inform practice
(Cohort2 Tutor: D).

And I think it is something organisationally that people are proud of. I think it is also that they are proud that we do it – that we have that element to what we do (Services Director).

By practitioners

Returning to the practitioners' appraisals with which we started this section, the strength of feeling about a project unfinished was associated with points we outlined when discussing the consequences and outcomes of the Project, and the sense that the wider agency programme had been foregrounded at the expense of the individual projects.

I really wanted something for the kids who took part in that, you know this wasn't really necessarily something for me but it was more about the kind of process that they took part in and that feels like that's kind of disappeared and that it has been something more *corporate*. (FG1)

I ended up somehow presenting my research project three times to a public audience which I'm really, I am not really sure why. I kind of got into this situation where I did it at a staff conference and two other kinds of conferences and that felt like it... it lost meaning for what it was about. (FG1)

One consequence of this was the feeling we referred to earlier, of having muted voices or becoming invisible. Two further pointed and compelling comments from that same focus group will serve.

I just kind of feel that it's almost like as if I'm not sure if I did it, does that make sense? I kind of feel as if I've gone in, I've done it, I've come back out and it's not really been noticed.

It's just I feel as if I've kind of gone in and done it and I go away to Edinburgh and I disappear every so often to do things like this and I come back but you know nobody's really aware of what I've done. And I kind of think that's a shame because it feels like it's been a major piece of work for me – for *me*. I think, I look at and I think I can't believe I actually did that but it feels like it's disappeared into the air somehow.

What provides the ground for their disappointment? We believe it is a conviction of the profound dissonance between the central drivers of their projects and the perceived tendency to corporatism. We saw in an earlier part of the report how bettering practice was the way most practitioners in both cohorts expressed their motivation. Yet this perhaps does not quite do justice to the way in which, with hindsight, they see as their projects' *raison d'être* – that the voice of the service user should be heard. We have brought together the most evocative statements of this kind in Figure 1. We suspect that this more exact way of stating the central rationales was something that emerged from the projects, and may not have been the way most people saw things at the outset.

Place Figure 1 – Service users' Voices about HERE.

If this is true, why might this change have taken place? We suspect the answer lies in the process of learning and discovery that we have described for most of the projects. The doing of practitioner research was itself almost an epiphany, at least for a significant core. This is a large claim, and one that if true has significant implications for the agency.

Research and practice

It is only in the doing of practitioner research that its critical identity takes shape. This is largely, for the evaluation team, the consideration that has prompted the inductive, bottom-up approach to understanding and evaluating the CHILDREN 1st Project. It also means that what has been said about practitioner research is unlikely to be mirrored in other studies. Indeed, our conclusions are somewhat different in emphasis from our own previous work. We would anticipate that our conclusions are more likely to resonate with the relatively few examples of more ‘programmed’, agency sponsored, and moderately resourced practitioner research networks.

In the light of this, the key *motifs* and identifiers of practitioner research have emerged part and part in each section of the evaluation findings. Yet in closing we want to echo and underline some of the weightier aspects of the research practice relationship. This can most easily be done by revisiting the outsider/insider debate. In setting out the practitioners’ experience of research in their projects, we suggested that they rarely held consistently to either ‘pure’ view. It is not original to say that ‘Terms such as *use*, *insider*, and *own account* are useful as much for the complexities they raise as for the directions in which they point’ (Shaw and Faulkner, 2007: 59). But we think the projects at CHILDREN 1st convey this with a richness and detail that *is* perhaps original.

Practitioners occasionally identified with the merits of an insider position, though even then it tended to be with care. Alan, for example, argued that

Although it makes it a compromise on objectivity slightly ... one of the strengths of practitioner research is you’ve got people on hand that you already have a relationship with who you can pick up the phone and say ‘I am doing a piece of research – would you be willing to participate?’ and that personal connection undoubtedly helps – there is no doubt about that.

The distinction was often stated, but again with caution. Alison said of the tutors, ‘I just saw them as the experts really, as the academics. I never really thought of myself as being academic so I thought it was different’. A member of the focus group for the first cohort made an interesting comparison.

And I think it depends on where you’re coming from, because a friend of mine’s a lecturer and an academic and so excited about it, much more than me. So I think if you’re a practitioner you don’t have the same thought about it than an academic would. So I think tutors maybe were more enthusiastic about it than we were. (FG1)

Lesley pointed up the perceived difference in the context of the decisions about research ethics, that when practitioners are doing research ‘it’s not the same as someone from the university who’s doing it in a much more intensive way’.

These relatively neutral distinguishing comments should be placed alongside other comments that seem to assume recognition of the benefit that can be gained from incorporating aspects of

mainstream academic research. The value of perspective and standing back were often mentioned. 'You know it is very easy in this line of work, you know, you are constantly busy to not get a chance to take a step back from that and do some reading and some perhaps more formal research in your work' (Alan). He seemed to think he had not fully exploited this opportunity. 'That was a challenge, putting time aside and spending more time reading the kind of research, and I think if I had done that and incorporated more of that into my study it would have been a bit more authoritative'.

The academic standpoint is sometimes viewed by practitioners as disabling real world understanding. This view was occasionally explicitly countered in the Project.

My sense is that my tutor has done quite a lot of, maybe not practitioner research but research that brings him in touch with real people... people on the ground. So I felt he has understood that. I think just how to disseminate. (FG2)

A similar application of the point was sometimes made to direct practice.

...you get into local authorities, it's all about the job you're doing, and I think this is a different kind of thing, I know it ties into that very closely but it's got an academic kind of feel to it and that's a part of me that I want to improve' (Shona)

For Shona this was linked to a wish to take things further. We conclude with this example of the way practitioner research can, in Gillian's words, 'open up so many possibilities I had not thought of'.

I think what I am and what I would like to be are different. I am a practitioner and that is my job, so that's what I have to do and I'm bound by the context of that because that is my income, that is my livelihood. I would like to be more of a researcher. It's opened up a whole range of things that I've never done before and so I would like to pursue maybe ways of combining the two

Practitioner research networked projects are in general valued by participants, and do make for important differences, although not always in ways planned for or anticipated.

Figure 1

Hearing the Voice of the Service User

It actually reminded me of how hard that can be sometimes for kids and I don't pretend to remember this every day but sometimes actually it allowed me to think, to be free of all the other things, the letters and phone calls and just thinking just generally how hard it must be to buzz the buzzer, to come to this building. That really came through for me when I did the research programme. (FG1)

And I think what my research can be is, speaking from the perspective of the child or young person, (is) a kind of real challenge to some of the formal services that are set up for helping children. (FG1)

I think that was really important that kids could actually have a voice and say "well this is what I feel about this". I think that's good to know that potentially would be kept and even if they said things contrary to possibly where the organisation was at it would still be put in a document and not kind of be put aside. For all, that was really important. (FG1)

The fathers' own words were so powerful and evocative that I really wanted to capture their views. (Alan)

The people that I spoke to I was just, I felt privileged that I spoke to them to be honest because (they) told me things and I thought 'oh my god where am I going to put this or can I put this down' because it wasn't what I was asking them!. So a lot of the information that I got I didn't use which was I think just people telling me their story basically. (Alison)

How did you manage to keep motivated? Well I just kept thinking about the people that had talked to me and it was about what, well, what it was about, was listening to them and trying to get their views heard really and that was what it was about. (Alison)

That's been a great really, and just giving children the chance to say, the level of maturity of kids that you wouldn't expect at all, in terms of their understanding of what the meeting was for, what it's about, why they were all there. That's been quite humbling in a way I think and good, that's been really interesting. (Jean)

Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the assumption that the underlying aim is to strengthen, and in some ways formalise, the existing system.

Set-up

- During processes of recruitment and set-up further clarify expectations of practitioners around time commitment, milestones, and communication.
- Generate and maintain identity amongst participating practitioners.
- Be alert to inevitable cohort differences and prepared to develop strategies to respond accordingly.

Operation

- Consider whether a fixed end date would assist practitioner motivation and planning.
- Ensure the responsibilities of all those training, tutoring and administrating on the Project are clearly defined.
- Examine whether practitioner research *is* best served by formalisation (e.g. accreditation and attendant issues of academic ‘quality’ and requirements of ethics committee review) or flourishes under looser arrangements.
- Ensure practitioner time for completing research is preserved and they feel able to lay claim to it.

Dissemination

- Plan and develop a dissemination plan for each project – ensure dissemination is immediate and communicated to all stakeholders including practitioners, their teams, tutors and service users.
- Celebrate success and ensure projects and practitioners are at the centre of such celebrations.
- Accept that practitioner research involves an element of measured risk taking. Acknowledge the wide range of benefits flowing from practitioner research – of which completed reports are only one.
- Consider how practitioner researchers can ‘staircase’ to further challenges, for example acting as buddies for the next cohort, involved in research funding applications, and undertaking further pieces of practitioner research.

Deliberate to develop

- Our final recommendation, given there are various issues that the study raises where other peoples’ judgements may be equal to ours, is to explore the possibility of a deliberative mechanism that brings together various project stakeholders. Perhaps taking our executive summary as a starting point for deliberation such stakeholders could usefully debate and make recommendations of their own about the next steps in developing practitioner research.

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Appendix 1

Carrying out an Evaluation of the Project

‘Social workers must be so trained scientifically that they belong in the social science group...such training is needed for the sake of social research itself, which so often demands a competent understanding of the field of social treatment...and should be carried out by social workers, who are also trained in social research’ Edith Abbott¹²

If we could lift Edith Abbott from Chicago of 80 years ago we suspect she would have welcomed the CHILDREN 1st initiative. As sketched out in the early part of this report, it has several significant elements – an agency practice agenda, a concern to respond to national visions for the development of social work and social care, a partnership model with a university combining training and mentoring, and perhaps most prominently, an intention to facilitate practitioner research as a collective, networked endeavour.

We undertook a two-part study - first, a relatively systematic literature review and second, an evaluation of the CHILDREN 1st initiative. Because of unanticipated delays in the progress of the second practitioner research cohort, these two parts of the study were completed at different points in time.

Literature review

The objective of the literature review was to establish an understanding of the wider context for practitioner research and its impact on practice. We explored the feasibility of a range of databases including *Socialcareonline*, *Web of Knowledge (including Social Science Citations Index)*, *Web of Science*, and *Social Work Abstracts*. Web-based search engines such as Google and Google Scholar were assessed as a basis for locating grey material, as were the more relevant grey literature databases for example the System for Information on Grey Literature in Europe (SIGLE), and GreyNet (Hartman, 2006). A search of the reference lists of key papers identified in the initial scoping searches also helped identify additional papers within the mainstream and grey literature (so-called ‘snowballing’). We set the period 1998-2007 as our boundary for practitioner research studies.

We also drew upon our established international network of academic and practitioner experts to identify gaps in our literature search and to suggest emerging work that we should also take into account. In identifying literature for inclusion we were selective in international coverage. In addition to Scotland, we choose to emphasise countries where there is a shared tradition of social work practice, organization and training - including England, Wales, Ireland, New Zealand and Australia. We also took into account significant differences in how practitioner research is conceptualized and has developed (for example, the empirical practice movement in the USA differs in key respects from practitioner research as understood and practised in the UK).

¹² Edith Abbott was the first dean of the School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago. This quotation is taken from Diner, 1977: 11, 12.

We adopted elements of the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) guidelines for systematic reviewing of the practitioner research literature (Coren and Fisher, 2006). The databases that figured most strongly in our search are listed in Figure 2. The full details of the methodology for the literature review are in the final report (Mitchell, Lunt and Shaw, 2008).

Figure 2 Search Databases and Gateways

ASSIA & Social Services Abstracts
Web of Science & ISI Proceedings
IBSS/Ovid Journals
Child Data
WebSpirs (includes Social Care Online)

Project evaluation

We approached the evaluation stage of the study drawing primarily on case study methods, similar in some respects to the approach developed by Robert Stake (Stake, 1995). Our focus was on the nature and implications of the Project as *network*, rather than on the details on each of the research projects carried out by members of the two cohorts.

The period in which the evaluation was put on hold from June 2008 to January 2009 meant that we had data brought together in two different periods. This had some consequences for the study. Positively, it gave us the opportunity to bear in mind the fieldwork data from two periods and sometimes involving the same people. Generally speaking, we were struck by the extent to which the messages from the fieldwork were similar at the different times. Negatively, meeting the original contract requirement to examine the possible impacts of the second cohort studies was limited by the fact that, even with a deferred completion, none of the second cohort projects were complete before we wrote this report.

Table 1 about here

We undertook a desk-based review of *documentation* (Table 1), including three main kinds of document. CHILDREN 1st provided copies of the available documents associated with the development of the project. Unfortunately a major file of papers from the early stage of the Project development had been mislaid. We were also provided with copies of the training materials. Finally, we were given access to six completed reports from the first cohort.

These materials helped us gain a clearer understanding of local processes and organizational learning in action. Along with discussions with programme funders, the materials also helped us clarify programme objectives, programme design, formative evaluation lessons and intervention logic.

We were asked to bear in mind two caveats regarding the training materials. First, tutors prepared a lot of handouts in advance but did not use them all. At this stage, it was not easy for tutors to recall which ones were actually given out. Many of these were also used again or adapted for cohort two. Secondly, the intention was to use the handouts largely as resources for students to refer to after the teaching sessions. In the sessions, the tutors normally highlighted key points for a handout; invited discussion and arranged exercises, not necessarily in that order. For instance, some topics began by dividing the students into twos and threes to discuss or brainstorm e.g. about differences between a research interview and social work interview. Tutors did not keep records of all the exercises.

The fieldwork for the evaluation comprised a mix of different qualitative methods. We carried out audio-recorded semi-structured interviews with members of all stakeholder groups, viz agency managers, practitioners in each cohort, and the trainers/tutors from the Glasgow/Strathclyde university social work programme (Table 1). On occasion these were by telephone, albeit recorded. Three early informal meetings took place. These were recorded by note-taking. Three focus groups were arranged – one for tutors and the others for each of the two cohorts. We were able to gather and infer information from those practice research projects that did not or may not complete. The fieldwork was clustered at three points in time, viz early in 2008, around June 2008 and in the Spring of 2009.

The *analysis* of the fieldwork data was fairly detailed, albeit we did not attempt any original methods of analysis. We started the analysis by concentrating on Cohort 1, to ensure that any significant differences between the cohorts were not buried by our analysis. We also divided the analysis between us, with one of us (NL) exploring the tutor and agency data, and the other (IS) concentrating on the practitioner data. Again, our primary reason for this approach was that we wished to stay open to differences in thinking and approach between the different stakeholder groups.

We intentionally shifted our stance from time to time. For example, the interview schedules were firmly grouped around a linear set of general questions, and this underlay almost all the interviews. Yet when we came to analyse the data, we were more attuned to familiar grounded theory approaches. Fairly extensive work was done on identifying how those we had interviewed understood the practitioner research experience, identifying ‘concepts’ regardless of whether they fitted closely with the linear model of the interviews. We gradually moved to grouping concepts into categories. We were alert to the possibility that we could undertake narrative analysis, but in the event the interview data offered limited possibilities in this direction. The net result is that we hope we have been able to combine a clear and accessible report structure with a depiction of the new, the unexpected, and the puzzling.

Table 1 Evaluation Fieldwork

Fieldwork Data Sources		Agency	Tutors	Cohort 1	Cohort 2
Semi-structured interviews	Face to face	2	0	2	4
	Telephone	1	3		1
Focus groups		0	1	1	1
Informal meetings		2	1		
Documents	Reports from research projects			6	0
	Agency Project papers	√			
	Training materials		√		

Appendix 2: Completed Reports

Ewan Ross - Engaging within Fathers: Men in the FGC Process

<http://www.children1st.org.uk/shop/files/SPR-PRA-L001.pdf> (Summary)

<http://www.children1st.org.uk/shop/files/SPR-PRA-L002.pdf> (Full)

Fiona Campion - Child protection in Scottish Sport: is it working in practice?

<http://www.children1st.org.uk/shop/files/SPR-PRA-L003.pdf> (Summary)

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