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# **Recognising the Significance of Early Years Practitioners as Creators of Knowledge.**

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Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy

York St John University

School of Education, Language and Psychology

September 2023

Janice McArthur Darkes-Sutcliffe confirms that the work submitted is my own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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# Acknowledgements

There are so many people I am grateful to for supporting me throughout the writing of this thesis. The love and understanding of my family, especially Simon for his belief in me, and all that he has done to get me to this point. For my close and special friends - they know who they are, as they have been such a source of encouragement, helping me in all the many ways that they have. My supervisors, Joan, Caroline and Sarah, who have been so generous in sharing their understanding, advice, and time with me. For the practitioners that contributed so much, their passion, commitment, honesty, openness, and feistiness; we shall all never walk alone. Especially though, to J, a constant source of strength, inspiration, and joy!



# Abstract

My inquiry revisits ideas of knowledge, exploring the essential components of a process which enables Early Years Practitioners to generate new knowledge about how to create and sustain rich learning for children through building their own learning and becoming knowledge creators within a learning community.

Based on my participatory worldview, which acknowledges the interconnectedness of individuals and the importance of democratic ways of working, the thesis integrates first, second and third person strategies of inquiry. Engaging with others in a process of Collaborative Inquiry, practitioners were able to create and share their own theories of practice, becoming generators of change, making an experiential difference to children's well-being and learning.

The research is grounded in the experience of practitioners, who have unique insights into the children and families with whom they work, and particular understandings about what is needed to meet the complexities of carrying out their roles effectively. This knowledge has traditionally not been listened to, and their voices have been silenced. By acknowledging their understanding in a collaborative context, practitioners were able to recognise the significance of their own inner knowing and began to value themselves, becoming confident to make changes to practice and build upon their learning.

I reflect upon and discuss the main elements of a process by which practitioners might sustain themselves and advocate for the children in their care. I show how undertaking practitioner-led inquiry presents a way for practitioners to become more critically aware, learning with and from each other to deepen understanding of their pedagogy, and become more confident to articulate and develop practice. Locating our experiences within a wider social and political context, I offer a radical critique of notions of knowledge and neo-liberal influences on early childhood education, proposing an alternative perspective emerging from a democratic vision of participation and interconnectedness.

# List of Abbreviations

For readers accessing an e-copy of the thesis \*\* denotes a linked cross-reference to another section of the writing.

\*The term “Early Childhood Education and Care” (ECEC) is used throughout, because this most accurately recognises the connection between those in the early years sector working with children aged 0-5 years. In the UK, those working in ECEC, includes teachers, mainly working in maintained schools and nurseries, and early years practitioners working in Children’s Centres and the Private, Voluntary, and Independent sector (PVI) which includes those working in independent schools, practitioners in privately owned day nurseries, and voluntary providers offering sessional care. Childminders are also an essential part of the workforce. All have a range of qualifications and experience.

<b>AHDC</b>	Aiming High for Disabled Children
<b>ASN</b>	Additional Support Needs (term used in Scotland for SEND)
<b>BBTM</b>	Birth to Three Matters
<b>CI</b>	Collaborative Inquiry
<b>CPD</b>	Continuing Professional Development
<b>CGFS</b>	Curriculum Guidance For The Foundation Stage
<b>DIPTAC</b>	Developing Inclusive Practice Team Around the Child (local name for a Network group for SENCOs)
<b>ECEC</b>	Early Childhood Education and Care
<b>EECERA</b>	European Early Childhood Education Research Association
<b>ECM</b>	Every Child Matters
<b>ELG</b>	Early Learning Goal
<b>EP</b>	Educational Psychologist
<b>EPPE</b>	The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (research study)
<b>EYFS</b>	Early Years Foundation Stage

<b>EYFSP</b>	Early Years Foundation Stage Profile
<b>EYP</b>	Early Years Professional
<b>FEEE</b>	Free Early Education Entitlement
<b>ITT</b>	Initial Teacher Training
<b>LA</b>	Local Authority
<b>LDD</b>	Learning Difficulties and Disability
<b>MA</b>	Master of Arts
<b>NASEN</b>	National Association for Special Educational Needs
<b>NEG</b>	Nursery Education Grant
<b>NNEB</b>	National Nursery Examination Board
<b>PVI</b>	Private Voluntary and Independent
<b>QIO</b>	Quality Improvement Officer
<b>SEND</b>	Special Educational Needs and Disability
<b>SLA</b>	Service Level Agreement
<b>SLT</b>	Speech and Language Therapy
<b>TACTYC</b>	Together and Committed to Young Children (Association for the Professional Development of Early Years Educators)
<b>OfSTED</b>	Office for Standards in Education

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# Chapter One

## Introduction

“As an adults’ sense of identity or knowledge of themselves and others grows in depth and meaning, they become increasingly in control of how they think about themselves. Reflective minds and minds not crowded with detail but in search of concepts, ideas and principles mean that people are in control of their thinking and have greater control over their transactions within their socio-historical contexts.”

(Allman, 1983:114)

## 1.1 Setting the Context for the Thesis

My thesis aims to show how important the understanding of the individual educator is to the learning and development of the young child. Not just in the sense of their prescribed role and the responsibilities that come with that, but the significance of their understanding of themselves and their perceptions about what they do and why; how they connect with the child and how they see and understand themselves in relation to that encounter. The key focus is on practitioner learning and the significance of the personal 'inner world' of beliefs and values to pedagogical practice and knowledge creation. This reflects Stuart and Pugh's understanding of pedagogy when they state:

Pedagogy is an understanding of how children learn and develop and the practices through which we can enhance that process. It is rooted in values and beliefs about what we want for children and supported by knowledge, theory, and experience.  
(Stuart and Pugh, 2007: 9)

I argue that those working in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) are compelled to work in a way which is driven by target setting, evidence-based practice and managerialism. Such an approach is based upon a hierarchical mechanistic view of the world which only recognises as 'real' that which is external and quantifiable, and is unaccepting of that which is internal, unseen but no less 'real'. This has resulted in a troubling deficit that fails to value the importance of feelings, intuition, nurturing relationships, creativity, and individual agency (Campbell-Barr and Leeson, 2016).

Based on my participatory worldview, which acknowledges the interconnectedness of individuals and the importance of democratic ways of working, I adopt Heron's extended epistemology of knowledge to embrace four ways of knowing (Heron, 1996). My research is grounded in the work of practitioners who have unique insights into the emotional and learning needs of the children and the families with whom they engage every day, as well as possessing particular understandings about what is needed to meet the challenges and complexities of carrying out their role effectively. In my research this understanding is acknowledged, valued,

and built upon, establishing connections between inner and outer worlds and a renewed confidence in personal agency that is articulated through a more nourishing environment for children and their families.

The impetus for my research inquiry grew out of my reflections on my own work as a Local Authority (LA) teacher advisor providing training to teachers and early years practitioners working in ECEC. It was my quest for a deepened understanding about the nature of my work and a desire to seek a means by which to *improve* what I did that motivated me. I wanted to understand more fully how research could help me to do this and enhance my work with the those I supported (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). The thesis explains the process of my inquiry as I explored how I could use my educational influence to work in collaboration with others in order for them to lead developments in their particular contexts, with the shared aim being to provide a rich and nourishing learning experience for pre-school children. My approach is grounded in understandings gained from my work as a teacher, my reading, and my previous experiences of action research.

Conventional approaches to research have relied upon the objectivity of the researcher where the aim is to minimise the effects of subjective interpretation (Usher, 1997). My research which involves first, second, and third person inquiry, takes an alternative stance. Research, in an effort to assure objectivity and rationality, has relied upon the development of a 'detached consciousness' of the researcher. In post-modern approaches however "research increasingly depends upon an involved, aware consciousness" (Brew, 2001:56). Furthermore, it cannot be assumed that any research can be 'neutral' because as Angela Brew explains, the practical choices a researcher makes:

...about what knowledge to pursue, the methods we choose, how we analyse our findings and what we communicate to others, are all caught up in a tension between on the one hand, adherence to traditional ideas of knowledge as separate from knowers and on the other, an awareness that we are culturally and historically located and that is affecting what we look for and what we see.

(ibid:87)

This observation serves as an encouragement to me that my thesis, through locating my stance and explaining the reasons for the methodological choices I have taken, offers a contribution to the opening up of the narratives of inquiry.

The account is written in the first person describing the process of the inquiry as I researched my practice in collaboration with others. It uses the story of my personal experience and learning to develop my own evolving theory of practice, working with others in relational and participative ways, confronting issues of power and positioning to explore what needs to happen to make an experiential difference to provision and practice which leads to the improved wellbeing and flourishing of young children. The thesis is not set out in the conventional way, where it is traditional to have an introduction, followed by the literature review, research, data analysis and conclusion. My thesis takes an alternative form which is made clear in the 'Map of the Thesis' below.

## 1.2 Timeline of the Research

The inquiry has taken place over many years, spanning a period of almost 13 years; developing and evolving as contexts, situations, as well as my understandings and role within the LA changed over that time. The research is described as having three distinct phases, each one although having particular characteristics, being connected to and informing the other. The first phase took place between October 2010 and June 2011 when a Collaborative Inquiry was established in which I was both a co-subject and co-researcher (\*\*Chapter Five).

The transformational impact of the Collaborative Inquiry meant that my journey of self-inquiry continued as a practitioner-researcher as I endeavoured to find ways to continue to research my own practice in order to improve it and establish different approaches in order to engage more collaboratively with the early years practitioners that I worked with. This period was a demanding time, requiring an on-going struggle to hold on to the creation of a relational and democratic pedagogy in which respect and participation was central. This is explained in \*\* Chapter Six, which describes the second phase of the inquiry, reflecting 'in and on action'

(Schön, 1995), covering the period from June 2011 to September 2013. The reflective phase describes the events that were lived through and experienced, and although reflected upon at the time, loops forward to include a deeper analysis informed by the literature as I wrote this thesis.

The third phase \*\*Chapter Seven details the action research that took place between September 2013 up until March 2015. In July 2015 I left my post at the LA and later that year commenced my PhD at York St John University. An important part of my inquiry was to return, almost ten years later, to visit some of the practitioners who had contributed their research stories and gather their recollections about how being involved in the ‘Collaborative Inquiry’ and the ‘Stepping up for Two Year Olds Project’ had affected them and their practice. These visits, described in \*\*Chapter Nine, took place between January 2023 and June 2023.



**Figure 1 Timeline of the Research**

My original contribution to knowledge will be to share my own organic and evolving theory of practice which explains how the nature of provision for young children can be developed and continuously evaluated by early years practitioners. The theory of practice will be based on a

worldview, a clear set of values, and a process by which early years practitioners can see themselves as knowledge creators, becoming more confident to recognise the value of the work they do; learning to work with children in a way that is in the children's best interests, attuning to their emotional needs, which forms the basis for a pedagogy that helps them to flourish.

### 1.3 Map of the Thesis

My thesis begins by giving a brief outline of the context for my study, explaining why I have chosen to undertake the research in the way I have. It details the purpose and significance of the inquiry, explaining why action research, as the overall methodology selected, is central to my approach. Schön argued that new knowledge which can be applied in practice would not be created from objective observation and analysis, but that it needed to arise from practice itself, asserting that “the scholarship of application means the generation of knowledge for, and from, action” (Schön, 1995: 31). The generation of knowledge for and from action is central to my argument, as practitioners engage in practitioner-led inquiry in their various professional contexts.

This chapter introduces the research question and research aims and provides an overview of the research approach which integrates first, second, and third, person forms of research strategy, encompassing ‘I, We, They’.

The most compelling and enduring kind of action research will engage in all three strategies.... A (first person) self-inquiry.... may benefit by joining with others in (second person) collective inquiry.... all this in the service of the wider (third person) purpose of human development...

(Reason and Bradbury, 2001:6-7)

This approach provides the framework for my thesis, starting with an explanation of the significance of first person research to the inquiry process, showing how a process of critical self-reflection enabled me to make connections with my past to come to an understanding of the reasons for the choices I made to undertake my research in the way that I did.

Chapter 2 moves on to examine the ontological stance that I take, highlighting how ownership and creation of knowledge have become a contested space, challenging traditional assumptions about the nature of knowledge and the nature of reality (Brew, 2001). From my ontological understandings emerges an epistemology that recognises there are many ways of knowing, thinking and being moral (Hall, 1996), the importance of embodied knowledge (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006) and tacit knowing (Polanyi, 1958) to personal discovery and learning, as a way of bringing to life human potential.

My reading and reflections led me to develop a participatory worldview (Heron, 1996; Reason, 2005.) which acknowledges the interconnectedness of individuals and the importance of democratic ways of working. My thesis is developed to explore the concept of participatory practice (Ledwith and Springett, 2010) and the idea of a 'participatory consciousness' (Heshusius, 1994; Brew, 2001) and its relationship to knowledge and coming to know. Participatory consciousness questions the very nature of the perceived boundaries that construct the idea of self and the perception of distance between the self and other. In contrast to 'alienated consciousness', Lous Heshusius (1994:16) describes participatory consciousness as being:

.....an awareness of a deeper level of kinship between the knower and the known. An inner desire to let go of perceived boundaries that construct 'self' and that construct the perception of difference between the self and other.

Chapter 3 explains the methodology used in my research which is qualitative in nature, situated within a participative paradigm (Heron, 1996). It differs from traditional social science research approaches located within a positivist paradigm which separate the world into subject/object, researcher/researched. I believe that such descriptions which focus on division and separation do not reflect with accuracy the way the world is or how we experience it (Barad 2007; Lenz Taguchi, 2010). I provide a brief overview of the historical developments in action research, providing a rationale for using first, second, and third person action research. I give a description of Collaborative Inquiry and Practitioner-led inquiry, highlighting the importance of



dialogue to learning with and from others. Discussing qualitative research, Dadds and Hart (2001:166) use the phrase 'methodological inventiveness' to explain how some practitioner researchers create "their own unique way" through their research, which the authors argue, is key to its effectiveness:

.... for some practitioner researchers, creating their own unique way through their research may be as important as their chosen research focus. We had understood for many years that substantive choice was fundamental to the motivation and effectiveness of practitioner research (Dadds, 1995); that what practitioners chose to research was important to their sense of engagement and purpose. But we had understood far less well that how practitioners chose to research, and their sense of control over this, could be equally important to their motivation, their sense of identity within the research and their research outcomes.

It is this sense of 'methodological inventiveness' that I embrace to integrate the research methodologies I use, drawing insights from each of them as the process unfolds. This section outlines the range of methods utilised to gather the data which include narrative and written accounts, action plans, video footage, role play, photographs and learning journals. The chapter progresses to an examination of the relationship between researcher and the researched and provides the impetus for an in-depth consideration of the Ethics of Research. For this I have taken inspiration from Smith (1991:31) who argues that in educational research:

.... we are at the end of a history of describing ourselves and our work in methodological terms and at the beginning of describing ourselves and our work in ethical terms.

Research, then, comes to be viewed as an ethical way of being, with researchers, practitioners, children, and families making sense of the world together (Gallagher, 2015).

Chapter 4 focuses on epistemology, explaining how my inquiry prompted me to explore the different kinds of knowledge early years practitioners draw upon when carrying out their work. I examine the idea of 'A Basket of Knowledges' a term Verity Campbell-Barr (2018, 2019) uses to conceptualise a pluralised concept of professional knowledges in ECEC. I take a particular look at the significance of embodied knowledge to understanding. I argue that an

epistemology of practice and alternative approaches to educational research need to be developed which reflect more than a passive role for practitioners as consumers of knowledge, but which include the role of the practitioner as an active agent in creating knowledge for the improvement of teaching and learning (Pine, 2009). I contend that those living and working with children on a daily basis both hold and create valuable knowledge in relation to knowing what is required to improve children's wellbeing, learning and development.

Using Heron's extended epistemology of knowledge to embrace four ways of knowing (Heron, 1996), I show how drawing upon subjective, inner knowing is of particular significance in knowledge creation, and how by undertaking practitioner led inquiry in a collaborative context, early years practitioners are enabled to become not just receivers of knowledge but knowledge-creators, developing and articulating their own personal theories of practice. The following three chapters describe the phases of the Action Research and show how, by engaging in participatory practices through collaborative, practitioner-led inquiry, this facilitated critical reflection and provided opportunities to learn with and from each other.

Chapter 5 describes the first phase of the Action Research, explaining how the Collaborative Inquiry was instigated and developed. It introduces the concept of 'Generative Pedagogical Isomorphism' (Formosinho and Formosinho, 2007; Oliveira-Formosinho, and Formosinho, 2012). This is a theory of practice which demonstrates how by creating respectful participatory learning opportunities for practitioners, individual agency and autonomy is fostered, so that practitioners in turn can create similar opportunities for the children and families with whom they work. The chapter also highlights some of the learning and insights- the new knowledge that was created, individually and collectively, which led to a deepened understanding about how, in our work with children - 'Every Moment Counts'. Using practitioner accounts, I will demonstrate how those involved in the inquiry, began to value their embodied knowledge, recognising the significance for the child of what they do on a moment to moment basis.

Chapter 6 focuses on the second phase of my inquiry and is more analytical in nature. It

describes several of the professional challenges that I faced during a time of great change. It examines aspects of the socio-historical and socio-political influences that formed the background to the research, highlighting how different views are shaped by assumptions, experiences, and ontological positions. In this section I interrogate and challenge current understandings of what constitutes 'quality early years provision', agreeing with Pence and Moss that:

Quality in early childhood services is a constructed concept, subjective in nature and based on values, beliefs, and interests, rather than an objective and universal reality.  
(Pence and Moss, 1994: 172)

My thesis offers insights towards a different view of quality which includes other perspectives and voices that are being articulated in practice (Moss, 2019; Campbell-Barr and Leeson, 2016). I show how the continuing debate between education and care continues to exist within the backdrop of a neo-liberal agenda of school and setting effectiveness. I argue the dominant narrative, presents a deficit model of early years practitioners, showing how those working in ECEC are situated within a positivist climate of externally driven accountability, which stifles individual agency and fails to recognise the importance of nurturing relationships and creativity. I also examine how, in the quest to 'prove impact through measurement', a standards agenda and a culture of evidence based practice is failing to account for what is less tangible but no less important (Campbell-Barr, 2018).

Chapter 7 details the third phase of the Action Research which was much larger in scale. It describes the strategic role I assumed in setting up Action Learning Groups for Early Years Practitioners working with 2 years olds across the City. This chapter links leadership work with the quality improvement agenda and explains the impact of my influence. It shows how through collaborative working practices and engaging in practitioner- led inquiry, practitioners were learning with and from each other, and through this process, new thinking and knowledge was created. By using narrative accounts and photographs, I will show how practitioners began to articulate their own theories of practice and implemented changes to their practice and

provision. I examine some of the understandings that were developed and show how this made an experiential difference to children's well-being and learning through more attuned relationships, enabling pedagogic spaces, and strengthened parental engagement.

Chapter 8 describes the sustained impact that this way of working has had and tells the story of their responses to my influence. It demonstrates how practitioners became more critically aware, deepening their understanding of the importance of their role, as well as becoming more confident and able to articulate their pedagogy to others. This claim is substantiated when almost 10 years later, managers and practitioners from 3 settings, shared their recollections and the insights they have gained. Their reflections demonstrate the continuing impact this has had for them and their settings at personal and professional levels. I also highlight the current situation, where opportunities for practitioners to meet together, and reflect and learn from each other are restricted.

Chapter 9, theorises my practice, explaining the significance of my role as pedagogical leader and practitioner researcher, explaining my own evolving and organic theory of practice and analysis of my approach. It shows how by developing learning communities and working in a new and innovative way, an enabling and nurturing space for practitioners was opened up, where the value of collaboration, inquiry and reflexivity was demonstrated. In this space, human agency and autonomy were supported, allowing practitioners to creatively envisage alternatives and bring about transformation (Giddens, 1984; Pantic and Florian, 2015; Archer, 2000). It describes how my theory of practice evolved and the means by which I endeavoured to establish relational ways of working. I draw upon some examples to demonstrate this, such as the collaborative working which resulted in the development of a new accredited qualification for Early Years SENCOs (Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators) and the development of projects which used practitioner-led inquiry in various contexts.

Chapter 10 considers the Originality and Impact of the Research and brings together the ideas, theories, values, conclusions, and implications for the way I worked with the group participants.

I argue that this way of working, a participative, relational pedagogy, embraces a more life enhancing concept of continuing professional development; developing leadership capacity at an inter and intrapersonal level. I show how this approach makes links between inner and outer worlds, moving the participants from being recipients to facilitators of change. I show how finding a new way of working through individual and collaborative inquiry as a community of learners, results in change from the grassroots, change that is sustainable.

The thesis concludes by providing a summary of the research findings and implications for future research, showing the essential components which enabled early years practitioners to generate new knowledge about how to create and sustain rich learning environments for young children and how others may adopt a similar process in their own contexts. I demonstrate how, by encouraging each of the participants to research their own practice, the research had at its heart a democratic vision for change and reveal how this can be adopted by others in various leadership contexts to build a dynamic learning community.

## 1.4 Purpose and Significance of the Research

My research seeks to identify the essential components which enable early years practitioners working in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) to generate new knowledge about how to create and sustain rich learning environments for young children. I will demonstrate how, by engaging with others in a process of Collaborative Inquiry (CI), I opened up an enabling and nurturing space in which early years practitioners created and articulated their own theories of practice.

There is a growing consensus that, if a child attends a good quality ECEC setting, this benefits them, their families and society as a whole (Vandell et al, 2010). My concern is that in the City where I worked for many years as a Local Authority (LA) Early Years Advisory Teacher, 1 in 4 children live below the poverty line. These children already disadvantaged, are potentially further disadvantaged through attending poorer quality settings (OfSTED 2013; Campbell-Barr 2012; Mathers et al 2007). Despite the investment in training, data at local and national levels

shows that the gap between outcomes for children living in persistent poverty and their peers from more affluent backgrounds is not decreasing (EPI -Tuckett et al: 2022:22). Approaches taken to 'Diminish the Difference' still do not seem to be working. However, it could be argued that analysis in this way fails to recognise that the policies of neo-liberal governments have shifted responsibility for addressing the underlying reasons for poverty, instead putting increased pressure on schools and settings to solve the problem of under achievement. Vandenbroeck (2021:14) highlights this suggesting:

...it is remarkable that, contingent with the rise of inequality and poverty, a dematerialisation of poverty seems to occur in policy and a discourse is spreading that the most salient source of poverty is education, rather than a lack of resources, income inequality, or failures of the welfare state.

From September 2013, Local Authorities were required to make available and fund free early education/childcare for 'eligible' two year old children (DfE, 2013). The main aims of this national targeted support were to:

- Support two year old children's learning and development.
- Support access to childcare for parents who are economically disadvantaged.

However, research evidence (Mathers et al, 2014), published shortly after the programme was initiated, highlights the concern that unless children can attend good quality provision in their pre-school years, the potential for narrowing the attainment gap for vulnerable learners and improving outcomes for children will be lost.

In ECEC, defining what 'quality' means, as well as how it is measured, is highly contested. This will be the focus of further analysis in \*\*Chapter Six, but I agree with Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2002) when they trouble the notion of quality reminding us that:

...the concept itself has achieved such dominance that it is hardly questioned. For the most part it is taken for granted that there is some thing- objective, real, knowable- called quality.

(Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence, 2002:4)

Research about practice and provision for children under three in ECEC has only relatively recently begun to emerge (White and Johansson, 2011; Degotardi et al, 2013; Goouch and Powell, 2013), with most of the research previously being carried out in schools with older children. At a time when increasing numbers of two-year-old children are accessing early years provision, more understanding is needed about what sort of professional development and training might help early years practitioners to offer appropriate learning for very young children:

While we know a great deal about the kinds of environments in which babies and toddlers thrive, there is still much to learn about how to create these environments in the context of early childhood education and care. There is a new consensus that pedagogy for children under three needs to be specialised and is different to provision for older children.

(Mathers et al, 2014: 4)

New knowledge needs to be created, which focuses on how to support early years practitioners to provide the quality of care and education young children need. It is my contention that such knowledge has to include the perspectives and understandings of those who work with children daily. An important principle underpinning early years practice and highlighted in the Early Years Framework for Learning and Development (DfES, 2007), is that children are recognised as competent learners from birth (Malaguzzi, 1993). My research assumes that practitioners are also competent learners, and that they should be valued and respected as such. They have gathered implicit and explicit knowledge through their experience, which needs to be recognised and built on. I believe such an approach challenges the deficit narrative that exists about practitioners working with the youngest children.

Helen Gunter (2001) argues that it is vital that educational research includes the understandings of those who are 'knowledge workers' in the field, arguing that currently teachers are seen only as

.... objects to be reformed by the government and to be led by their structural betters.... teachers who think, challenge and question both habits and reforms have a different engagement with pedagogy than the technical requirements of job descriptions and competency frameworks

(ibid:74)

Whilst here Gunter is referring to teachers, it is clear that her observation similarly applies to early years practitioners who are involved in the care, teaching and learning of the youngest children in our society. Yet our educational system provides very little time and scope for those that teach to challenge and question the systems and processes that they are bound to. I contend that through the vehicle of practitioner action research, opportunities to think, question and challenge do arise. However, although the concept of ‘practitioner-researcher’ has in recent years become commonly used, it is generally used in the context of encouraging practitioners to be more reflective and see themselves as ‘researchers’ in their own work. There is, therefore, a considerable way to go if we are to learn how to truly ground research in the work of practitioners, because as a culture, we are so used to seeing research and practice as two different (and often mutually exclusive) activities. In the current climate, it is difficult for practitioners to see themselves as knowledge-creators and even more difficult to contemplate that their findings could be explicitly fed into a wider research agenda and used to influence policy making and political decision making at local and governmental levels. However, I argue that policy making, and political decision-making should be influenced by research grounded in the work of practitioners; my thesis aims is to contribute towards this, showing how this could potentially be achieved.

Research that engages with multiple truths and multiple ways of knowing must include the voices and perspectives of all involved, and in doing so challenges the separation of research from action, the separation of the researcher from the researched, and “assumptions about the control of knowledge and assumptions about the nature of educational reform.” (Pine 2009: 31). Central to my approach is recognising the importance of tacit knowing (Polyani, 1958) and embodied knowledge (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006) so that the skills, knowledge, experience, and competence of practitioners are valued, and their ability to identify problems, critically reflect on their actions and collect data is recognised and built upon.



## 1.5 Research Question

**How can I work collaboratively with early years' practitioners to enable them to perceive and value themselves as knowledge creators in order to generate rich learning environments in which children can flourish?**

## 1.6 Research Aims

- To revisit ideas of knowledge identifying the essential components which enable early years practitioners working in ECEC to generate new knowledge about how to create and sustain rich learning environments for young children.
- To ground the research in the experience of practitioners by involving them in practitioner led inquiry, engaging in critical thinking to facilitate change.
- To research into my practice to improve what I do, by developing my own evolving theory of practice as I engage with others in a process of collaborative inquiry and explore ways in which individual understandings developed within a collaborative context can influence the professional context within which we are located.
- To make my account public in a way that has meaning and value for practitioners, leaders of practice, educators and others who are able to influence policy and practice for children in their early years.

## 1.7 Professional Context and Rationale for the Research

The workforce in ECEC is comprised of practitioners (mostly women) with a wide range of experience and qualification levels. Those working in PVI (Private, Voluntary, and Independent) settings tend to be the least well qualified and least well paid. The Sutton Trust Report '*Sound Foundations*' (Mathers et al, 2014) highlights the importance of 'workforce development' and of the need to ensure that practitioners working with the youngest children are more highly qualified. The independent review of ECEC qualifications (Nutbrown 2012) likewise focused on

the importance of the quality of the staff who are delivering early education. This is a matter of national significance and concern, reflected in 'More Great Childcare' (DfE, 2013) with the government making bold proposals to improve the quality of staff working in ECEC by reforming regulation, enhancing the status and qualifications of the workforce and making childcare more affordable for parents. Tougher entry requirements have now been introduced as well as the continued emphasis on a graduate workforce and simplification of the current range of early years' qualifications. However, this current focus on new qualifications and entry requirements does not address how the 400,000 childcare professionals already working in group based settings can be supported to further improve and provide well for the children in their care. It can also be argued that it is not the qualifications in themselves that lead to high quality provision but "... the ability of better qualified practitioners to create a high quality pedagogic environments" (Pacey, 2016: 4). Furthermore, understanding practitioner quality is complex, and there is no simple relationship between staff level of education, and quality within the setting or children's learning outcomes. (Early et al, quoted in Pacey 2016:4).

The increase in investment in ECEC now means that the families who have children of 3 or 4 years old, have an entitlement of up to 30 hours of 'free funding' per week, and since 2013 many more 'eligible' two-year-old children are accessing early years provision. In a study to find out how the early years workforce was responding to this funding initiative, the authors highlight how despite the widespread recognition of the importance of well qualified staff, the possession of a qualification was not enough and that:

more was needed if practitioners were going to be working with the children and families accessing funded places for two-year-olds. Key informants talked about a set of skills extending beyond formal qualifications, and that work with young children requires particular dispositions most of which are concerned with emotions.

(Georgeson, Campbell-Barr, and Mathers 2015: 2)

I contend that the current narrative focusing on 'quality of staff' only in terms of level of qualification is a narrow one; it fails to acknowledge the significance of the work carried out by the very many effective and committed early years practitioners, who for all sorts of reasons may not pursue formal qualification courses but who, nevertheless, are making an important

contribution to the well-being, education and care of pre-school children. My work and discussions with practitioners in ECEC, particularly those working with the under threes, reveal how they see themselves as members of a group who have a fairly low status in society. This has resulted in them often feeling:

...neglected, undervalued and unsupported compared with their colleagues working with older children. In such circumstances it is difficult for them to develop a sense of professional self-worth.

(Manning-Morton 2006:43)

In my work I saw this for myself, observing how on numerous occasions practitioners in Private, Voluntary, and Independent (PVI) settings, were 'othered' (Rorty, 1993) often having unfair assumptions made about them by teachers and those from specialist services who situated themselves in a professional hierarchy above them and who failed to see their competence and commitment:

**Notes made after Transition Meeting: Senco Network – June 2010.**

*There is a particular concern when children make the transition from nursery and into school about continuity for the child, especially if they have SEND. It is widely recognised that this is a time when children and families are especially vulnerable. However, the discussions today really showed how the work and understandings of the practitioners [from PVI settings], who know that child best are barely recognised and there seems to be a perception by many in schools that the 'real' work of early intervention does not begin until the child starts with them. This attitude not only results in a poorer experience for the child but erodes any confidence in their professional role that PVI practitioners have. They become discouraged, with some of them feeling the work they do is of little consequence and so a downward spiral is set up which can mean that some end up saying 'Why bother?'. Phone calls not returned, transition meetings cancelled, Learning Journey files not being considered because "we will do our own ones here", parents being told by some receiving schools, that their child can only attend for limited hours etc.*

JDS personal notes 12<sup>th</sup> June 2010

I witnessed frustration and disempowerment in so many of the early years practitioners I worked with, and I felt a deep sense of injustice about that. This was a key motivator for me striving to improve my practice and to begin my research (What can I do about this? How can I

work differently to ensure their value is valued?) I chose not to focus on practitioners' lack of qualifications and began by focusing on what connected us; that each of us are learners engaged in a process of finding out about ourselves, our practice, and our place in the world. By acknowledging learning as being "the means by which people come to perceive, interpret, criticise and transform the worlds in which they live" (Mezirow 1983: 128), I began to recognise that we are all learners who are able to learn with and from each other. This understanding began to inform the approach I took when delivering 'training' sessions as well as the choices I made in my research. I am aware that this may be a different way of positioning early years practitioners, because the dominant narrative presents a deficit model of those working with the youngest children, where the emphasis is on level of qualification. There also exists an historic (and continuing) polarity in ECEC, between what is considered 'education' compared with 'childcare' resulting in a hierarchical division between those who work in schools and those who work in the PVI sector (Cameron et al. 2009).

My research began in 2010, just as the Conservative-Liberal Coalition Government came to power, making significant changes which impacted greatly on the work of Local Authorities and the services they provided. From 2011, the Council that I worked for as an early years advisory teacher, had tremendous financial pressures placed on it by Government, being required to cut its budget by £173.4 million over a period of just 3 years. By 2017 there was a 52% reduction in Government funding allocated to the Council. The continuing financial austerity pressures had devastating effects for all those who worked for the LA in terms of job losses and cuts to services.

The 'School Improvement Team' to which I belonged, had to make radical changes to the way it worked not only through reduction in staff numbers, but also in the way services were delivered. The further development of the 'Academy Schools' agenda with more responsibilities being placed with schools themselves, resulted in major organisational changes and a new relationship between the LA and schools being forged. It was, without doubt, a time of great uncertainty and change for me personally, for those in my team and indeed for all those

involved in early years education across the country. It is within the context of these national and local changes that I began my research.

I had become frustrated and concerned by the ‘top down’ approaches to professional development that were provided for the early years practitioners with whom I worked. I was aware that the LA had been spending hundreds of thousands of pounds each year on such training, but that the investment was not always producing the improvements to practice that were anticipated. I began to reflect on why this was, and the approach taken to training. The session was delivered by someone who had a particular expertise in a subject area and ‘expert/cascade’ transmission model was typically used. This had its focus on content- what activities needed to be done and suggestions of particular ways about how best to do this. Participants eager to put new ideas into practice then attempted to replicate the suggestions back in the contexts in which they were situated. Usually, (although not always) the staff member who had attended the training would be given a short, designated time in a staff meeting to ‘cascade’ the training to other members of the staff team. Plans were made either by the individual staff member or across the setting, to put the expert’s ideas into practice. I saw this process replicated across very many settings on very many occasions. Some settings did not even have staff meetings at all, and this greatly troubled me. My observations echoed the findings of Colley (2006), who argues that the current training system and workplace culture provides very little time for reflection and development of abstract thought. Likewise, Osgood concluded that:

The training of greatest appeal, relevance and effectiveness to early years professionals was that which provided scope for reflexivity leading to heightened professional confidence.

(Osgood 2012:43)

Through my reading, I discovered that new theories and principles about how adults learn had emerged (Knowles, 1983). These andragogical principles can be briefly summarised as:

- The central importance of personal experience in learning. Our past experience and present needs are the most important resource for further learning.
- The creation of a supportive but challenging learning environment in which participants can give and receive support from their learning colleagues.
- The involvement of learners identifying, articulating, and clarifying learning needs
- The mutual responsibility of learners and teachers for managing and directing learning experiences.

These principles set learning within a context of self-direction and emphasise the importance of creative collaboration between learners and teachers. Allman observes that:

As an adults' sense of identity or knowledge of themselves and others grows in depth and meaning they become increasingly in control of how they think about themselves. Reflective minds and minds not crowded with detail but in search of concepts, ideas and principles mean that people are in control of their thinking and have greater control over their transactions within their socio-historical contexts.

(Allman 1983:114)

In my role delivering training to adult learners, this new understanding was influencing the approach I began to take in my work. I wanted to work in a different way, one that resisted the 'expert' model and reflected a more democratic approach that included the perspective of the practitioner, acknowledging the complexities of practice and offering opportunities for reflection with others.

## 1.8 Action Research as a Methodological Choice

I wanted to develop ways of making the training I did more experiential and to offer opportunities for reflection and discussion for those who attended. I had just completed my Master of Arts (MA) and had taken part in my first practitioner action research project which had a transformational impact on the way I saw my role and the way I wanted to work. It convinced me that action research could be used as a vehicle for professional learning, to focus

on the actions of the individual learner, recognising that each person brings to the learning space their own particular understandings, experience and perspective.

Pascal and Bertram (2012) discuss the importance of those working in ECEC, not just trying out something new but instead deeply questioning 'how' and 'why' and 'what' things are done. They contend that by using practitioner research and systemically gathering evidence, those involved are able to gain greater knowledge of their own impact on the services that they offer as well as the understanding and confidence to make constructive changes for the better. Furthermore, they suggest that those working directly with children and families, even if they do not realise it, have an enormous amount of knowledge that has come from their daily experiences and that through developing practitioner research, this knowledge can be used to improve provision, without the need to bring in outsiders. This observation resonated greatly with me because I knew I wanted to work with practitioners in a different way, moving away from 'delivering training' to an approach which offered support for :

.... professional development through action research building on a model of learning, where practitioners are challenged and helped to find new ways of doing things. The emphasis is on practice rather than subject knowledge. The route is personal enquiry (What do I do?) rather than others' advice (What do you think I should do?)  
(McNiff, 2002: 29)

I also recognised that when I had been a class teacher, I did not want the children I worked with to be passive recipients of knowledge, and that now working with adult learners, I likewise wanted them to be actively engaged in their learning, questioning, challenging, and debating the implications of theory for their practice and provision. With regard to teaching and learning as Doll (2012) notes, an irony exists, because when the learner is given too much there is also deprivation whereby:

.... we are depriving him [sic] of the learning which will lead to thinking. This learning is not the *narrow* learning of copying and repetition, but the *broader* learning of manipulation and re-invention. Thus, it is through active discovery that the human powers of thinking are developed. These powers will remain dormant and underdeveloped if learning is passive, receptive and repetitious, but they will blossom where learning is active, manipulative, and inventive.  
(Doll, 2012: 195)

Critics have strongly opposed traditional approaches to education that focus on knowledge transmission, disassociated from the learner's experience, a 'banking model' of education, relying on transmission of knowledge from facilitator to participant; students passively 'receiving' knowledge deposited by those that teach them, with knowledge seen as "a gift bestowed by those that consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing" (Freire 1970/1993:45) Freire saw this as a mechanism of oppression, suggesting that it limits people, their creativity and possibilities for action, leading to mechanical, technical practice and people unable to act critically and creatively (Grieshaber and Hamm, 2021). I wanted to work in a different way, one that challenged the knowledge transfer approach to continuing professional development (CPD), so popular in the LA, with one that provided opportunity for collaborative working and critical thinking.

In 2010, I was tasked with developing a new project for the LA to improve SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disability) provision in PVI Nurseries. This provided me with the opportunity to establish a practitioner action research project which would ground the research in the experience of practitioners and embrace a different way of working and a new way of learning, one which, I hoped, would result in learning that was transformational. My aim for this piece of work had at its heart a social vision for change, not just organisational change (Foster, 1989) and, as such, was imbued with 'personal and social intent', concurring with Jean McNiff (2013:7) who states:

..... it is my firm belief that research does not exist of and for itself but should bring useful knowledge into the world of everyday personal and social practices and should help us all find ways of living more peaceful and productive lives together to explore ways in which the singularity of individuals developed within a collaborative context could influence the wider socio-cultural contexts in which they are located.

My research inquiry, integrates first, second and third person forms of research, encompassing 'I, We, They', each of which are interconnected and dependent on one another. This approach is explained more fully in Chapter 3, \*\* Methodology, but each aspect will be highlighted and explained throughout the different phases of the research.



This introductory chapter has described several of the concerns I was having about the training provided for the practitioners I worked with within the LA. It was my many questions about this and my awareness of the deficit narrative that exists about early years practitioners more widely, that formed the rationale for my thesis. In outlining the context for my research inquiry, I argued that at a time when increasing numbers of two-year-old children are accessing early years provision, new knowledge needs to be created about how to support those in ECEC working with the youngest children, in a way that gives voice to their perspectives and understandings. My inquiry seeks to find a way for this to happen and begins in the following chapter, by locating and outlining the research stance I have taken; showing how this has been informed by my ontological and epistemological understandings that were deepened by engaging in first person inquiry.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Ontology**

“The element of addressing one’s own subjectivity...means that one comes to understand oneself as a researcher belonging to a particular world or mode of practice. That world, that mode, that belonging can be articulated and re-examined.”

(Peim, 2018:19)

## 2.1 Beginning My Research Journey

In 2009, as part of my Master of Arts degree, I undertook my first action research project. This marked the beginning of my growing understanding about the many assumptions I held about the nature of educational research. In this chapter I will explain how a deepened awareness of the ontological and epistemological stance that informs my work, emerged as part of the research inquiry and my continuing development as a researcher.

I have given much thought to my role as practitioner- researcher (who was known to the participants as a Quality Improvement Officer) and my desire to carry out the research ‘with’ the early years practitioners, not ‘on’ them. For this reason, I chose action research as the methodology, as it is described as being “*by, with, of and for people, rather than on people*” (Reason and Bradbury, 2001:2 italics mine).

My research inquiry integrates first, second and third person forms of research, encompassing ‘I, We, They’. Reason & McArdle (2004:1) suggest that these three approaches should be considered as “strategies of inquiry”, each of which are interconnected and highly dependent on one another, and that “good action research will stimulate inquiry at each of these levels”. This approach will be explained more fully in the next chapter, but throughout my writing I will illuminate the connections between the ‘**I**< **We**< **They**’, identifying and explaining how each of the strategies of inquiry were worked out as the different stages of the research process unfolded. This has meant that amongst other things, I have had to confront issues of power and positioning, as was particularly apparent in the first phase of my research when establishing the Collaborative Inquiry (Chapter Five) Engaging in first person inquiry has enabled me to analyse and account for my subjectivity, and has been the process which has helped me to clarify and make explicit the values and worldview that I hold, a deepened understanding of which emerged as part of my inquiry.

## 2.2 First Person Research: The I

First person action research involves cultivating an approach of inquiry to all we think, feel, and do, including being curious about our perspectives, assumptions and behaviours (Marshall, 2016). Adopting such a research stance

Involves fostering the disposition to be curious; being open to the views of others; questioning 'the taken for granted'; making the implicit explicit and reflecting on one's daily work.

(Arnold, 2012:2)

Judi Marshall describes her approach to first person research as "living life as inquiry" explaining how this is "at the same time philosophy, orientation and practice" (Marshall, 2016: xv). Her writing helped me realise that I had to learn how to develop my skills of self-inquiry; to look at myself to act with awareness, not just in terms of what was happening in the outer world of my actions, but also learn to pay attention to, acknowledge and value, the inner world of my thoughts, feelings and beliefs. In parallel to this, also recognising that "all self-understanding is realized within the normative frames each culture provides its members" (Rosenwald and Ochberg, 1992:2) which not only determine, but potentially constrain self-awareness. Marshall (2016:88) highlights how researchers need to be alert to this, arguing that:

When we articulate and hear life stories it seems likely that social values, dominant discourses and potential control and self-control are always implicated. They may be tacit or prominent.

Marshall sees narratives of inquiry as "provisional constructions of truth" which are multi-faceted, created through "active processes of interpretation and self-preservation with individual, interpersonal, social and cultural dimensions" (ibid: 87). When engaging in action research, the focus is not only on the nature of the action undertaken in the external world, in terms of provision and practice - the changes made 'out there'; the inquiry also has a metaphysical dimension, focusing on greater awareness of the significance of the 'inner world' of the researcher and their connections to others.

Action research is grounded in the reality of the school, classroom, teachers, and students. It is a process in which study and inquiry lead to actions that make a difference in teaching and learning, that bridge the doing (practice), learning (study) and reflection (inquiry). Action research reflects deliberate attention to the ways that **what we know** is caught up in what we do and **who we are**.

(Pine, 2009:31) emphasis mine.

To explain this and examine how '*what we know*' is intertwined with '*who we are*', it is important for me to make my ontological and epistemological understandings explicit, through drawing on my own experience, showing how this has informed the way I work with others.

## 2.3 Who We Are - Connecting of the Personal to the Professional

Angela Brew (2001) argues that there is a richness in human knowing which can be obtained through explicit recognition of a personal connectedness to research inquiries, and that developing an awareness of one's 'inner world' is a necessary part of the research process. Such awareness

....is not something we either have or do not have. It needs to be part of the research process. It is not something you ever arrive at. We are always in the process of becoming aware. There is only the journey.

(Brew, 2001:139)

This realisation signified for me a movement away from the need for detached 'objective' investigation, towards research in which the researcher is involved, "becoming aware". To do this has meant revealing my personal feelings and thoughts, something I have never done so consciously before in a professional context. It has also meant having to recognise and value my "inner knowing" (Polyani, 1958; Whitehead and McNiff, 2006).

When referring to auto-ethnography, Carolyn Ellis, and Arthur Bochner, (Denzin and Lincoln 2011) explain how the researcher's personal experience becomes important because it helps to shed light on the culture under study so that:

.... researchers incorporate their personal experiences and standpoints in their research by starting with a story about themselves explaining a personal connection to the project, or by using personal knowledge to help them in the research process.

(Ellis & Bochner, 2011: 741)

As I continue to read and learn more about the nature of research, I am coming to understand how the connecting of the personal to the professional is significant not only in auto-ethnographic research but is also an important aspect of action research methodologies too. Capturing such personal connectedness, is not an attempt at being sentimental or to construct a confessional narrative, but rather, as Peim explains is:

.... a necessary prelude to locating the focus of study in its proper context and its inescapable relations with a given point of consciousness. This element of addressing one's own subjectivity...means that one comes to understand oneself as a researcher belonging to a particular world or mode of practice. That world, that mode, that belonging can be articulated and re-examined.

(Peim, 2018:19)

When drawing on their own experience in this way, Peim argues that understanding of the researcher is re-framed and is seen differently, in a way that results in the deconstruction of the false division between subjective objective, becoming "a transformation of self at the level of knowledge" (ibid:20). At first it felt risky to write about my own experiences and inner knowing, and to make them public through my account. However, as reasoned above, engaging in critical self-reflection did reframe my understanding and helped me make connections with my past, in which I experienced social separation and exclusion from the 'mainstream'. The account below offers a reflection on my experiences through adolescence and early adulthood, and how there occurred at a very deep level, an understanding within me that what I had experienced at that time had prompted me to challenge the idea of absolute truth.

### *Personal Reflection 1: From MA Journal 2009*

*As a young girl, a strong memory of school was at the start of each day sitting on a wooden bench in the school corridor watching the other girls going into assembly, but not being part of what was going on. I was an outsider, not quite one of the group. I was brought up in a family with very strong, fundamentalist religious beliefs. Every morning I and four other Jehovah's Witnesses would wait outside in the corridor as four hundred or so grammar schoolgirls filed in and then out of the hall doors. Sometimes they laughed at us or made spiteful remarks, but mostly we were ignored. Reflecting on how it felt for me at this time, has helped me understand that one of the things I found most challenging was not that I was 'different' from the others, but that other people put me in a box labelled 'Jehovah's Witness'*

*At the time I just accepted that was how it was, and using the reasoning that was ingrained in me from church and home, explained away my feelings of exclusion. The church and my family emphasised the need to stand apart from the others who were part of a 'worldly system', teaching that whilst each of us had freewill, the choices we had were simple- black or white, good, or evil.*

*This emphasis was on separateness; I could choose to be (using the language of the witnesses) 'in the world' or 'in the truth'. I was taught to believe that as a Jehovah's Witness I was 'in the truth', different from the others and that was how it should be. At the time, this reasoning helped me to explain away my feelings of exclusion. As I grew older, unlike the rest of the young people in the congregation, and against the advice of the church elders, my parents encouraged me to go to University. There I began meeting new people and mixing with the wider community, gaining new learning which literally did 'open up the world' for me. I began to embrace the freedom that came with that, and for me the revelation that there are many ways of knowing, thinking and being moral (Hall, 1996).*

The realisation, that there are many ways of understanding and experiencing the world, with none representing an absolute 'truth'- that all are being influenced by the social, political, and cultural context in which we live, was extremely significant for me. It was at this time I was introduced and easily related to, a social constructivist approach to ideas about truth and reality. This growing awareness and understanding gave me the courage to de-construct and later reject the fundamentalist religious system that had so far influenced me.

Mezirow (1990) speaks of “frames of reference” which adults use to define their world. These are structures of assumptions through which experiences are understood which, he argues, set our “line of action”, and delimit and selectively shape the way we think and feel, rejecting things that do not fit our preconceptions as irrelevant; however:

When circumstances permit, transformative learners move toward a frame of reference that is more inclusive, discriminating, self-reflective, and integrative of experience.  
(Mezirow, 1990:5)

My learning had enabled me to reflect upon my experiences and see things, including my sense of self, using a different frame of reference, with a new perspective. I was rejecting the notion of ‘truth’ as being a simple choice of right or wrong, black, or white, a dualist way of thinking; but instead began to embrace the world as ‘multi-coloured’ with many different ways of being in the world and many different ‘truths’. It marked a shift in my ontological understanding and the developing sense of myself as a self-actualised knower (Maslow, 1968). My realisation that we are all active constructors of our reality, reflected my movement away from a positivist paradigm which sees ‘truth’ as an objective reality separate from human thought, a universal ‘truth’ existing independently of the observer, to one which acknowledges reality as being socially constructed and that as a social process, it is:

.... in no way existent apart from our own involvement in the world- the world is always *our* world, understood and constructed by ourselves, not in isolation but as part of a community of human agents, and through our active interaction and participation with other people in that community.

(Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence, 2002:23)

First-person research practices address the ability of individual researchers to foster an inquiring approach to their own lives, enquiring into the self, thinking deeply about their ideas, values, and behaviour (McNiff, 2002) “to act awarely and choicefully, and to assess effects in the outside world while acting.” (Reason & McArdle, 2004:1).

This is not a straightforward process. Undertaking first person research made me aware that I



had constructed a separation between my ‘professional’ and ‘personal’ identity with a boundary which, at first, felt improper to cross. Recalling my previous experience of action research for my MA, I revisited my account of a ‘critical incident’ that had occurred. (Darkes-Sutcliffe, 2009). Below I have included my analysis of this because it highlights the tension I experienced as I endeavoured to remain ‘objective’, which as a researcher I believed I should be. This tension was one that I later had to recognise, confront, and transform as part of the first phase of the Collaborative Inquiry as I started to see with ‘new eyes’ (see \*\* Chapter Five).

### ***Personal Reflection 2: From MA Dissertation 2009: 95-96***

*I was very open with the participants about my reason for returning to what had been said toward the end of the last meeting. In this session I was particularly mindful of taking a more **objective approach** and allowing time for dialogue to emerge.*

*We listened to the section again on the tape whilst reading the transcript through. My intention was to focus on what seemed to have produced ‘disequibration’ in the practitioners’ thinking. This related to who is best placed to share understandings with parents about children’s learning. I had hoped to be able to re-visit that moment with the participants and provide the opportunity to explore the reasons why the dialogue had produced a “cognitive jar” in their thinking (Piaget 1977).*

*However, the issue that was of crucial importance to the practitioners and the one that they picked up on and wanted to pursue, was related to their feelings, sense of belonging and professional self-identity. It was as though ‘Pandora’s Box’ had been opened and underlying tensions concerned with power, participation and belonging surfaced. As a researcher this was challenging for me with regard to gathering this unexpected data. How could I, with due regard to ethical considerations, incorporate these findings into my research?*

*Not to do so would mean only telling part of the story and so contributing to ‘a conspiracy of silence’ Again, I felt a **strong empathy** with the participants as they revealed their thoughts and feelings. I had been aware of some of the underlying tensions but had not understood the impact they were having, not only in terms of intra and interpersonal relationships, but also in compromising the ability of the Children’s Centre staff to work together effectively as a team. This session generated two sets of data, one concerned with my objective of exploring ways of deepening the dialogue with parents, the other producing insights into the feelings, needs and frustrations that exist for the participants. Managing the disclosure of such feelings was an unexpected challenge to me and I endeavoured to remain **as objective** as possible. I offered support whilst taking care not to collude with the participants. I needed to exercise a ‘**separation of role**’ between myself as researcher and my professional identity as someone who the participants were looking to for solutions.*

Despite feeling a 'strong empathy' with the early years practitioners who made up the participant group, I felt at that time for me to be an effective researcher, I would have to manage my subjectivity as rigorously as I could, 'exercising a separation of role'. Indeed, I was advised by one of my MA tutors that I needed to be 'subjectively objective'. I wondered how it was possible to achieve this, creating an anxiety within me about how I could disregard the feelings I had. It was not until undertaking the research for my thesis and discovering the paper '*Freeing Ourselves From Objectivity: Managing Subjectivity or Turning Toward a Participatory Mode of Consciousness?*' written in 1994 by Lous Heshusius, that I was able to resolve the conflict I had. In the next section, I explain this in more detail, when I discuss the idea of participatory consciousness.

## 2.4 Research as Relationship: The We

From the start of the inquiry, I needed to understand more and be able to locate, and be confident about the research stance I was assuming. I was intrigued by insights from feminist researchers, who argue that most aspects of positivism are antithetical to feminist principles and practice (Ribbens and Edwards, 1998). They argue that both quantitative and qualitative approaches are problematic, as they assume that the researchers' descriptions are reflections or representations of a reality captured within them. Feminist epistemology also challenges the assumptions of a 'research hierarchy' with regards to ways of knowing.

The conventional form that both quantitative and qualitative approaches take situates the researcher as detached ... and both approaches position the researcher in a knowledge hierarchy with or over those they research.

(Stanley and Wise, 2002: 7)

Feminist academics argue for the need for a distinct epistemological position for feminist research where 'objectivity' is viewed as a male practice, primarily concerned with the 'separation of the knower from what he knows'. Furthermore, in their discussion of theory, they argue that 'theory' always comes before research and that everyone derives 'theory' or 'second order constructs' from their experiences or 'first order constructs'.

Everyone constructs explanations of what they experience in their everyday lives. And so, we believe that all research is 'grounded' in consciousness, because it isn't possible to do research (or life) in such a way that we can separate ourselves from experiencing what we experience as people (and researchers) involved in a situation.

(ibid: 159)

Highlighting that research is "grounded in consciousness" and the significance of the personal within research experiences, helped deepen my understanding about the validity of the approach I was adopting. I began to comprehend that the presence of the personal in research is significant and should be recognised as "the crucial variable in each and every attempt to 'do' research" (ibid: 165). I had been mistaken in my earlier attempts to be 'subjectively objective' and was in full agreement with the authors, when they emphasise:

that all research involves, has at its basis, an interaction, a relationship, between researcher and researched.... Personhood cannot be left behind, cannot be left out of the research process. And so, we insist that it must be capitalized upon, it must be made full use of.

(ibid:165)

Even in writing this, I feel a boundary here. Is it right to cross this? Is it right to explain how scary it feels to be open about aspects of my 'personhood'? To tell how, when I read the following words of Freire for the first time, tears welled into my eyes, and something touched me deep in my soul?:

Men and women who lack humility (or have lost it) cannot come to the people, cannot be their partners in naming the world. Someone who cannot acknowledge himself to be as mortal as everyone else still has a long way to go before he can reach the point of encounter. At the point of encounter there are neither utter ignoramus nor perfect sages; there are only people who are attempting, together, to learn more than they now know.

(Freire 1970/1993:63)

For me, as the instigator of the project and the one facilitating the meetings, Freire's words touched and inspired me, but also radically challenged me. I intuitively 'knew' the wisdom of them, but as I reflected on my role and my attempts to ensure reciprocity, I was aware that my

claim to be doing so was a bold one. All contributions should be valued and listened to with “humility”, but could they be, would they be?

People sometimes too readily claim the title of second person inquiry when they engage collaboratively with others...For this to be fully the case the other parties need to be overtly aware of the mutuality and shared influence intended and able to shape the processes and sense making of the inquiry.

(Marshall, 2016: 9)

I needed to take note of Marshall’s advice; to claim that I/we were indeed engaging in second person inquiry, and for this to be authentic, I had to ensure there was reciprocity and shared influence in the shaping of the inquiry. In my journal I made a note of the key phrases that kept coming back to me and reflected upon them:

- research hierarchy
- partners in naming the world.
- personhood cannot be left behind- must be capitalised upon
- humility
- overtly aware of the mutuality

I thought about the challenges of establishing the research and how, despite my desire for the inquiry to be a truly collaborative experience, I knew how easily a 'research hierarchy' may come about. However, my reading and growing understanding guided me, and gave me the confidence to realise that the research started with me - my attitude, my feelings, my thoughts, my actions. It was as Angela Brew (2001) had said, a continuing process of becoming aware. A way of being and acting with authenticity, confronting, and overcoming the barriers to achieving this.

## 2.5 Participatory Mode of Consciousness

Adopting the language of second person action research raises issues of power. Claims about undertaking co-research cannot be easily achieved (Marshall, 2016). Discussing hidden power inequalities in research, Lous Heshusius (1994) discusses the idea of distance between the knower and the known, which she argues is often regulated by the researcher in order to stay

in charge of the research process and in turn, therefore, in charge of the act of coming to know the other. It is her belief that this originates from an “alienated mode of consciousness” which sees the knower as separate from the known, suggesting that:

...we need to fundamentally reorder our understanding of the relation between self and other (and, therefore, of reality,) and turn toward a participatory mode of consciousness.

(Heshusius,1994:15)

Participatory consciousness questions the very nature of the perceived boundaries that construct the idea of self and the perception of distance between the self and other. In contrast to “alienated consciousness”, Heshusius describes participatory consciousness as being:

.....an awareness of a deeper level of kinship between the knower and the known. An inner desire to let go of perceived boundaries that construct ‘self’ and that construct the perception of difference between the self and other.

(ibid:16)

Acting with such awareness means not only acknowledging the unequal power relations between the researcher and the participants but resolving them “through knowing as a mode of access in which egocentric concerns are temporarily released and the idea of distance, its management and control, is relinquished.” (ibid: 20)

This understanding challenged me once more to think very deeply about the “egocentric concerns” that I was holding, as they emerged and were confronted and transformed through the process of the Collaborative Inquiry (Heron 1996; Reason 1998; Whitehead and McNiff, 2006). This involved critical self-reflection as well as engaging in dialogue with others. Critical thinking, in the words of Freire, “perceives reality as a process, as transformation” (Freire 1970/1993:65).

Coming to the CI, and adopting a participatory mode of consciousness, allowed me to turn toward the other with awareness and humility, transforming the perceived boundaries

between self-other. Through dialogue, everyone was brought together in a deeper connection within the lived realities of each person, strengthening our trust with one another. Margaret Ledwith and Jane Springett call this 'connected knowing'; the forum for this was the Collaborative Inquiry (CI), where a trusting and enabling space was opened, encouraging each of us to connect and learn with and from each other.

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

(Ledwith and Springett, 2010: 129-130)

In contrast to separated impersonal knowing, characterised by abstraction, objectivity and rationality, relational knowing is at the heart of collaborative action research. Here, knowing starts from a relationship between self and other; where knowing involves acting in relationships and creating meaning in our lives; where relationships with others inform inquiry and practice and through our active interaction, to create new ways of knowing. The recognition that different ways of knowing, provide "routes to multiple subordinated truths" (ibid: 17) is located in a participatory and transformative worldview of knowledge construction and learning (Pine, 2009).

## 2.5 Participatory Worldview

As a researcher, I acknowledge as my 'own truth', that as a human being, I am both in the world and part of it. John Heron (1996:11) explains how "worlds and people are what we meet, but the meeting is shaped by our own terms of reference." He talks of a participatory paradigm, arguing that reality is subjective because it can only be known through the form the mind gives it, as well as at the same time, being objective because "the mind interpenetrates the given cosmos which it shapes". This insight is significant and relates to the nature of knowing, and how we understand and make

sense of the world. In his extended epistemology of knowing (a description of which can be found in chapter \*\*4.6 Heron's Extended Epistemology of Knowledge.), Heron identifies 'experiential knowing'. This is the type of knowing that takes place in direct face to face encounter with another. "this is not a positivist grasping of other things on the world" (Heron and Reason 2005:1) but as the authors explain:

the very process of perceiving is a meeting, a transaction, with what there is. When I hold your hand, my experience includes both subjectively shaping you and objectively meeting you. To encounter being or a being is both to image it in my way and to feel its presence, to know that it is there. To experience anything is to participate in it, and to participate is both to mould and to encounter, hence experiential reality is always subjective-objective, relative both to the knower and to what is known. Such encounter has greater immediacy and less mediation than our propositional knowing.

(ibid)

Furthermore, what we think knowledge is, and how it is defined, is tied to our beliefs about reality and our relationship to it (Brew 2001). This means that:

The consideration of ontology, of one's being in and toward the world, should be a central feature of any discussion of the value of self-study research.

(Bullough and Pinnegar, 2004: 319)

A participatory worldview acknowledges the connectedness of our world, a complex living system made up of separate but interrelated parts which includes human beings. As an interconnected whole,

...human beings are centres of awareness and action in the cosmos, they are both autonomous *and* inextricably linked with other humans and the rest of creation.

(Reason, 1998: 419)

A participatory ontology is distinctive from social constructivism because it acknowledges each person as unique, but also part of a collective whole "*inextricably linked*", contained and expressed within the infinite and eternal. It supports an epistemology that legitimises the significance of individual perspectives which are not bound only by what is observably acted out and seen, but also encompass the significance of the hidden 'inner world' of beliefs,

feelings and thought. And whilst the objective stance of researcher may represent a dominant worldview, one of fundamentalist science, I came to recognise this as “a particular spiral of understanding” (Ledwith and Springett, 2010:61) and challenge the dominant worldview which:

.... presents not only a straitjacket on how we think and act in the world, but also separates us from ourselves and how we express our understanding of the world.

(ibid: 62)

Adopting a participatory worldview reflects my own belief that because of our shared humanity each person is of equal worth, separate in identity but connected as part of a greater whole. Seeing the world in this way means that other possibilities are opened, so that if we begin to explore our connections with others "... this will lead us to different ways of knowing, and in turn, to different ways of being." (ibid:158). It is an ontology that emphasises a world not of separate things “but of relationships that we co-author” (Reason, 1998:5). It is holistic, interconnected, and participatory, and as such, more accurately reflects the beliefs I hold about the world and the actions I choose to take. This undoubtedly means that there is tension because it is in contrast to the ways I am often asked to be at work, times when I must act pragmatically in order to conform to the mechanistic, objectivist, hierarchical worldview adopted in my workplace and in wider society.

This chapter has given a brief overview of the professional context for my study. I have explained how conducting an inquiry with others began with researching my own practice, a process which required me to take a critical stance toward my own position and power as the one initiating the research, in order to “engage the voices and perspectives of all involved” (Kemmis, 2006: 460). I have located my stance as a researcher within a participatory worldview, drawing on the work of Heron (1996) and Reason (1998) to explain my ontological position. I have referred to the work of theorists such as Freire (1970) and Marshall (2016) and introduced the idea of 'participatory practice' (Ledwith and Springett, 2010) and the concept of a 'participatory consciousness' (Heshusius,1994; Brew,2001).



The following chapter goes on to explain the methodology for my research which is qualitative in nature, situated within a participative paradigm (Heron, 1996). I provide a rationale for using action research, utilising first, second and third person inquiry strategies. I develop my argument further in relation to the significance of a participatory mode of consciousness (Heshusius, 1994) to relational pedagogy, and coming to know. I relate this to an ethic of care and consider the role of ethics in research, especially regarding the role of the researcher. I present a critical stance towards the current nature of educational research, by highlighting the politics of evidence and consider ways of capturing validity in subjective claims to knowledge.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Methodology**

“The more students work at deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of the world.”

(Freire, 1970:60)

### 3.1 Influences on my research journey

Previously, I described my desire to bring research and practice together to support the professional development of the practitioners with whom I worked. This chapter describes the methodology used for my research inquiry which is qualitative in nature and situated within a participative paradigm (Heron, 1996). It explains why this methodology differs from traditional social science research approaches located within a positivist paradigm which separate the world into subject/object, researcher/researched. I believe that such descriptions which focus on division and separation do not reflect with accuracy the way the world is or how we experience it.

Undertaking my first action research project for my MA marked the beginning of my growing understanding about the many assumptions I held about the nature of educational research, including action research. My role as an advisory teacher for the LA, involved me in delivering professional development to groups of teachers and early years practitioners. I was an authority figure, positioned as an 'expert' in early years practice, a situation I felt uncomfortable with as I wanted to resist models of leadership that were concerned with power, control, and efficiency (Gunter, 2001). I believe that such approaches encourage what Gronn (1996:12) describes as the "barren models of followership" so that leadership comes to be seen as:

Something performed by superior, better individuals...located in top positions and as something done *to* or *for* other inferior, lesser people.

Whilst I acknowledge that I have certain experience and understandings about how young children learn and develop, and as an advisory teacher it was my role to share this, I recognised the importance of *how* I conveyed this learning. I endeavoured to work collaboratively with the Early Years Practitioners, wishing to facilitate learning in ways that encouraged autonomy. I had been introduced to 'Transformative Learning Theory' (Mezirow, 1990) which helped me understand more about reflective practice and its role in adult learning. Mezirow believed that transformative learning develops responsible autonomous thinking, and that facilitating such

understanding is the “cardinal goal of adult education”, learning to make “our own interpretations rather than act on the purposes, beliefs, judgments, and feelings of others.” (Mezirow, 1997:5)

I wanted to find out more about research and how it could help me do this. Through my reading, I was drawn to participative research methodologies and collaborative approaches to research and learning, as well as the development of ‘learning communities’ (Wenger, 1998). Here the emphasis was on democratic ways of working and what connected people, not what separated them. For example, Holman’s work in the field of sociology (Holman, 1987) demonstrates how research undertaken by and with the socially deprived, challenges existing power structures and enables those living in poverty to be part of a collective voice that can be heard. He calls this *‘Research from the Underside’* and documents the evidence from several community research projects that are based on a grass roots model “in which the investigated become the investigators.” (Holman, 1987:680). He argues that of particular significance is whether those who are researched “own the research” so that the process itself enables both the researchers and participants to be “more fully aware of the issues being investigated” (ibid: 681). Such an emancipatory approach to research appealed to me, but also challenged me to think carefully about the research process itself and the dynamic between a researcher and those who are the ‘research group’.

I have been influenced by the work of Jack Whitehead (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006) who argues for a shift in the epistemological base of educational theory. They express concern about the continued dominance of the social sciences and interpretive approaches where theory is generated by the external researcher, which the practitioners apply to their practice. Whitehead’s work has been concerned with developing a new form of theory, which he names as “Living Theory” that shifts the focus from outsider to first person forms of research, with practitioner researchers providing explanatory accounts of their actions and valid and authentic evidence of their claims to knowledge.

As we practice, we observe what we do and reflect on it. We make sense of what we do through researching it. We gather data and generate evidence to support our claims that we know what we are doing and why we are doing it (our theories of practice) and we test these knowledge claims for their validity through the critical feedback of others. These theories are our living theories.

(Whitehead and McNiff, 2006: 32)

Whitehead and McNiff consider the implications of social science approaches to educational research and highlight how the positivist methodologies of the natural sciences have been adopted in the social sciences. They argue that even though distinct approaches to social science methodology exist, the overall position is one that “takes human behaviour as an object that can be studied from a spectator point of view” (ibid:14).

Traditionally, research has been perceived as finding out or discovering some ‘truth’ or fact that could be discovered. In empirical research, researchers do research on or about other things or other people. Human behaviour, however, is far less predictable, and research on people more complex. So that in contrast to positivist methodologies, where researchers explore questions about other people’s lives, Action Research is “*by, with, of and for people, rather than on people*” (Reason and Bradbury, 2001:2 italics mine).

### 3.2 Action Research as a Vehicle for Professional Learning

I wanted to work in a way that resisted the ‘expert’ model and reflected a more democratic approach which fully included the perspectives of the practitioners, acknowledging their understanding and the complexities of practice. Schön argued that new knowledge which can be applied in practice would not be created from objective observation and analysis, but that it needed to arise from the practice itself: “The scholarship of application means the generation of knowledge for, and from, action.” (Schön, 1995: 31).

By using action research as a vehicle for professional learning, the focus turns not only on what is done, but also on the significance of the individual learner - ‘*what we know*’ and the importance of ‘*who we are*’ (Pine 2009). There is recognition that each person brings to the

learning space their own particular understandings, experience and perspective as well as their personal values and beliefs about the nature and purpose of educational practice. Just as babies and young children are understood as competent learners (Malaguzzi, 1993; DCSF, 2007), my research assumes that practitioners are also competent learners and that they should be valued and respected as such. They have gathered implicit and explicit knowledge through their experience, which needs to be recognised and built on.

Findings from research confirm the need for very young children to receive consistent and positive attention from significant adults in their lives, for their brain development, learning and well-being (Elfer, Goldschmied, & Selleck 2003; Fox et al 2010; Gerhardt 2015; Conkbayir 2021). Young children are dependent on their caregivers being able to connect with and attune to their feelings and emotions, and to respond in ways that are appropriate to their physical, psychological, and social needs. Challenging the view that such skills can be taught effectively using conventional teaching methods, I use action research to frame my inquiry exploring how I can work collaboratively with early years practitioners to develop rich and nurturing learning environments which are responsive to children's inner worlds; thereby creating new knowledge within a learning community.

### 3.3 A Brief Overview of Action Research

Action Research is generally agreed to have its origins in the work of Kurt Lewin, a social psychologist working in the 1930's -1940's in America. Through his work involving factory workers in decision making, and the realisation they could facilitate change that led to better working conditions, Lewin suggested that knowledge should be developed by problem-solving in real-life situations. He introduced the term 'action research' in 1946, convinced that action research could be used as an alternative to traditional decontextualised quantitative research.

There are many different approaches to action research and much discussion about its nature and focus (Greenwood and Levin, 2007). In the 1960's, Paulo Freire introduced liberationist thought and critical pedagogy to action research by advocating for the oppressed to actively

participate in the research, which greatly influenced the development of participatory and emancipatory research methodologies. In the UK, action research gained popularity during the 1970's, initially influenced by the work of Lawrence Stenhouse. He initiated the idea of teacher as researcher believing that action research could be used in education as a tool for professional development.

Since then, action research has developed and gained popularity across various disciplines, including social and health care work, and is used in many professional contexts to improve practice and for finding solutions to real life problems. It is understood as a mechanism of social change, grounded in principles of democracy to bring about improvements in people's lives, developed by people themselves (Greenwood and Levin, 2007). McNiff explains that in whatever context, action research is based on certain principles, namely:

the need for justice and democracy, the right of all people to speak and be heard, the right of each individual to show how and why they have given extra attention to their learning in order to improve their work, the deep need to experience truth and beauty in our personal and professional lives.

(McNiff 2002:6)

Finding a way to conduct research that respects and gives a voice to all participants, has been particularly developed by the work of John Heron (1996) and Peter Reason (Heron & Reason, 2001). Hilary Bradbury (Reason & Bradbury 2001), and William Torbert (Reason and Torbert 2001) have also contributed to the development of action research approaches that emphasise increased collaboration between all those involved in the inquiry, and the full integration of action and reflection, so that the knowledge developed in the inquiry process is directly relevant to the issues being studied (Reason & McArdle 2004).

Action research is also political, rooted in a belief in the transformative possibilities of personal and collective action. It is therefore situated in a contested arena, concerned with ownership of knowledge and power (Foucault, 1991). This is articulated by Reason when he states:

[T]he processes of knowledge creation have been monopolized by those who have power, and thus they create knowledge in the service of their own interests. What is the

point of findings that are 'true' if they have been produced in circumstances that disempower people, that distort social relations, and add to the monopoly power of dominant groups?

(Reason 2000: 2)

From the beginning, I wanted to ensure my inquiry was grounded in the principles of democracy, including, and involving the early years practitioners themselves; working together to create new knowledge in ways that would enable, rather than disempower; the need to act with authenticity, working with the practitioners so we were all aware of our mutuality and shared influence in the shaping of the inquiry (Marshall 2016).

### 3.4 Methodology

There is sometimes confusion about whether it is correct to call action research a methodology, or whether, as Reason contends, 'action research' is an orientation that informs methodological practices, not a methodology in itself (Reason & McArdle 2004). For me action research is the 'umbrella term' for a range of different methodological approaches chosen, such as Participatory and Emancipatory Action Research (Freire 1970/1993); Action Inquiry (Torbert 2001); Appreciative Inquiry (Watkins and Mohr, 2001), to name just a few.

For my action research inquiry, 'Collaborative Inquiry' and 'Practitioner-led inquiry' are the methodologies chosen, and I draw insight from each as the action research cycles unfold. Dadds and Hart (2001:166) use the phrase "methodological inventiveness" describing how "For some practitioner researchers, creating their own unique way through their research may be as important as their chosen research focus". It is this sense of 'methodological inventiveness' that I embrace in my research, utilising first, second and third person strategies of inquiry to integrate the research methodologies used. In action research, "there are lots of choices, and quality of inquiry is shaped by the appropriateness of these choices and the way they are made." (Reason & McArdle 2004: 6).



### 3.4.1 Practitioner Action Research- possibilities for new learning and new ways of working

Practitioner Research is, as the name suggests, research carried out by practitioners, and importantly it is for the purpose of advancing their own practice (McLeod, 1999). It is a process where the researcher reflects on an area of practice they wish to improve in a systematic way (Elliott, 1991; McNiff, 2002). In action research there is a commitment to improve the world in some way, rather than with describing or interpreting it, as more traditional approaches to research seek to do. Reason and Bradbury (2001:1) describe action research as being a participatory and democratic process concerned with the development of practical knowing.

It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory, and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities.

Researching with others, rather than conducting research 'on' or 'about them' opens up possibilities for new learning and ways of working. It provides a means by which 'issues of pressing concern' to the practitioners can be identified, explored, and resolved in ways that have real meaning for those involved.

Pine (2009:3) highlights how the continuing disconnection between educational research and practice, is because research has consistently been trapped in a dilemma between the 'doing' aspects and the 'knowing' aspects of a problem:

On one side are the real, practical demands of teaching, which are multidimensional, multilayered, context dependent, site specific, and continually evolving and changing. On the other side are the demands of the scientific: that knowledge must be generated with rigor and recognized principles of scientific inquiry and that such knowledge is generalizable so that it can be shared and used by a larger community than those with direct experience of a specific event.

He argues for alternative approaches to educational research which reflect more than a passive role for teachers as consumers of knowledge, but which include the role of the teacher as an

active agent in creating knowledge for the improvement of teaching and learning. He puts forward the need for an epistemology of practice that:

acknowledges our different ways of knowing and that takes fuller account of school context and teacher practice: uncertainty, uniqueness, complexity, conflict, and change.  
(ibid:25)

Maguire (1987/2000), in common with other researchers, highlights the dominance of a research paradigm that reflects a particular way of seeing the world, which restricts the possibilities for investigating the world which could be open to us.

Many practitioners and researchers are not even aware that a dominant research paradigm exists. Much of its power comes from the fact that many people don't know their research practices reflect a world view at all so they cannot consciously question underlying assumptions or actively consider alternatives...Thus, the dominant paradigm becomes more entrenched, and is assumed to be the only way of viewing or investigating the world.

(Maguire,1987:17)

As a way of illustration, '*The National College for Teaching and Leadership*' (now called '*Chartered College of Teaching*'), an executive agency sponsored by the Department for Education (DfE), promotes examples of 'best practice' research, dominated by school effects research which takes a scientific approach using input-process-output models. This raises for me certain questions about how research is currently being used in educational settings, with its strong emphasis on positivist approaches for data collection and analysis to justify effectiveness of one technological approach over another. A modernistic view and unquestioning acceptance of a positivist paradigm that 'truth' can be objectified, studied, and known. The scientific perspective is advocated as being more valid than other approaches to research. Yet, there are unevidenced assumptions that underpin this discourse, and which give hegemony to science-based educational research and evidence-based practice. However, critical analysis allows us to see how this discourse is situated within a neoliberal scientific political context. This is discussed in further detail in chapter 6, \*\* 6.5.1 Scientism, Evidence-based practice, and the Constriction of Democracy.

### 3.4.2 Democratic Deficit in Evidence- based Education

The narrow conception of research entailed in evidence-based education and the managerial agenda of hierarchical, 'top-down' approaches to educational improvement is of concern to many. Biesta (2007) talks of the "democratic deficit" in evidence based education, arguing that research can and should provide us with "different understandings of educational reality and different ways of imagining a possible future." (ibid:15)

Drawing on the work of Gerrard de Vries (1990), Biesta distinguishes between the *technical* and *cultural* role of research and argues that research can play a valuable cultural role in helping practitioners to acquire a different understanding of their practice by highlighting ways to see and imagine their practice differently. He warns that:

The current climate in which government and policy makers seem to demand that educational research plays only a technical role can and should indeed be read as a threat to democracy itself.

(Biesta, 2007: 21)

Similarly, Gunter (2012) states that although the educational field is pluralistic, at this time there is an over reliance on functionality. She argues for "conceptually informed practice that embraces a radical professionalism" (Gunter 2001:140) challenging practitioners, researchers, and theorists to be more socially critical and to engage with broader transformative issues.

If we are sincere in our interest to improve and develop learning, we need to shift our gaze toward teacher and student activity and actions...and show that the classroom is not a mechanistic 'black box' and instead put the teacher pupil relationship at the centre of learning.

(ibid)

Researching teacher behaviour and the relationships and processes involved in the complexities of teaching is certainly a rich domain for research. In her work with early years practitioners, Julia Manning-Morton uses the feminist concept of 'the personal is political' to argue that professionalism in the early years has to be understood in terms of the detail of practitioners'

relationships with children, parents and colleagues and that these relationships demand high levels of emotional knowledge, understanding and skill:

...being a truly effective early years practitioner requires a reflexive interpretation of those relationships not only through the lens of our theoretical knowledge, but also through the mirror of our subjective personal histories and our present, feeling, embodied selves.

(Manning-Morton, 2006:42)

This observation holds significance for my research as it highlights the relevance of subjective personal histories, *emotional knowledge*, and feelings as being relevant to quality of practice. By undertaking collaborative inquiry and practitioner-led inquiry, utilising first and second person inquiry strategies, I believe that the precision and detail of those relationships is revealed. It provides a way for us, as practitioners researching our own practice, to give voice to our stories and show how our practice with children enables them to learn; to share the successes and challenges of our work with parents and colleagues. Researching our own practice in collaboration with others allows us to connect to our subjective personal histories and inner worlds that may remain hidden in other approaches to research.

First Person Inquiry engages us in questions such as Who am I? What is important to me? How do I frame my world? What are my actions in the moment to improve what I am doing? (McArdle, 2004). Doing this

enables a person to critically explore their own purposes, framings, behaviours, and effects, and as an outcome of this inquiry to create their own living theories and to improve the quality of their practice.

(Reason and Torbert, 2001: 23)

### 3.5 Rationale for using first, second and third person action research.

My research inquiry, integrates first, second and third person forms of research, encompassing 'I, We, They'. Reason and McArdle (2004:1) suggest that these three approaches should be

considered as “strategies of inquiry”, each of which is interconnected and highly dependent on one another, and that “good action research will stimulate inquiry at each of these levels”.

Throughout my thesis, I will illuminate the connections between the ‘**I>< We>< They**’, by identifying and explaining how each of the strategies of inquiry were worked out as the different stages of the research process unfolded. The three inquiry strategies are interconnected, each informing and building upon one another as outlined below.

<b>1<sup>st</sup> Person (I)</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Person (I&gt;&lt;We)</b>	<b>3<sup>rd</sup> Person (We&gt;&lt;They)</b>
Inquiring how I can work collaboratively with early years practitioners to enable them to come to a deeper understanding of the needs of young children and find ways to create and sustain rich learning environments in which they can flourish.	Engaging with early years practitioners in a process of collaborative and practitioner- led inquiry enabling them to move from being recipients of theory and change, to becoming generators of change and articulators of their theories of practice.	Identifying and sharing with others, the essential components which enable early years practitioners through building their own learning and becoming knowledge creators within a learning community, to generate new knowledge about how to develop and sustain rich learning environments for young children.

### 3.5.1 First person inquiry - Starting with “I”.

As explained earlier, I am convinced of the potential of action research as a way of providing support for professional development through individuals asking themselves ‘what should I do?’, rather than depending on the advice of others ‘what do you think I should do?’ (McNiff, 2002: 29).

My research approach involves research *with* others whilst continuing to research my own practice using a series of action reflection cycles, each one informing the other as new learning emerges. This enables me to provide an authentic account of what my values are and how my theory of practice has evolved as a result of reflection in and on the actions I have undertaken (Whitehead, 2000; Schön, 1995). First person action research involves “becoming aware” and

cultivating an approach of inquiry to all we think, feel, and do, including being curious about our perspectives, assumptions and behaviours. As Judi Marshall explains, “first person inquiry of some kind is vital for all approaches to research that do not align with positivist presumptions of objectivity” (Marshall, 2016:8).

Engaging in action research requires us to change ourselves if we want to help others also to become participants in processes of change. Working with early years practitioners and supporting them to undertake collaborative and practitioner-led inquiry, involving their own first person research, focuses on how each of us needs to question, and not just presume, that we are getting it right for the children and families we work with.

Researching our own practice begins with each person providing a personal narrative starting with a reflection on our own beliefs and values. This is an initial, but important first step for each participant (including myself) to take ownership of their research, connecting our personal thoughts and beliefs to our professional practice. The ‘Researching Own Practice’ framework, provides a basis on which to do this (see \*\*Appendix One). Over time, this guides us towards giving an explanation for actions we have taken, as well as to account for the difference this makes to the experience of others. This framework is based on the action research framework developed by Jack Whitehead and Jean McNiff (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006) and begins by considering:

What are my values and beliefs about what matters for young children?  
 What is my concern and why?  
 What can I do about it?

### 3.5.2 Second Person Inquiry: (I-with-you; I><We)

Second person action research approaches, such as Collaborative Inquiry and Practitioner-led Inquiry, take place within a community of practice (Wenger 1998; Wenger and Wegner 2015). Areas of practice and provision that are of most concern to those involved, are explored ‘face-to-face’ with others. It requires a complete commitment to the group with whom we co-

operate, and its success depends greatly on the quality of relationship and communication between everyone involved. It is an organic, unfolding process, requiring on-going development of confidence and trust in one another, which cannot be forced. It involves becoming curious, being open to the views of others, questioning the taken for granted and reflecting on daily practice (Arnold 2012).

### 3.5.3 Collaborative Inquiry.

The methodology for Collaborative Inquiry is based on 'Co-operative Inquiry' (Heron 1996) and

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

(ibid: 1)

In phase one of my research, in partnership with Dr Joan Walton, I instigated and facilitated a 'Collaborative Inquiry', involving a group of 22 practitioners from 11 PVI settings. The meetings took place monthly over a period of 9 months, with us all working together as co-subjects and co-researchers, engaging in dialogue and cycles of action and reflection to develop both understanding and practice in matters of mutual concern.

The intention was that our reflections and mutual learning (**I>We** or **I-with-you**) would lead to a change in our daily actions, and in so doing we would contribute to the creation of knowledge in relation to enhancing the well-being and learning of the children. Details of the process and the outcomes of the first phase of the action research are found in Chapter Five.

### 3.5.4 Practitioner-led Inquiry

Building on the insights gained from the CI, which was the first phase of the action research, the next phase took a connected, but slightly different methodological approach. Practitioner-led Inquiry was used because the context for my research had changed considerably. My professional responsibilities had become more strategic, and so I was able to involve much

larger numbers of practitioners. In the '*Step Up for Two-year olds*' project, three 'Action Learning' groups were established, each one a learning community of between 16-20 practitioners, who met every 4 weeks over a period of 9 months. This arrangement was continued into the next academic year but with new groups of practitioners.

As with the CI, Practitioner-led Inquiry is based on democratic values and principles; a belief in the right and ability of each person to take responsibility for generating knowledge about their own life and their own practice. The Action Learning groups provided a supportive forum for each practitioner to learn, listening to other perspectives and ideas, and to engage in dialogue and critical thinking. From their discussions each practitioner constructed an open-ended research question of the nature 'How can I? or 'I wonder if?' about an area of practice that they had identified as needing more attention. They then undertook their own inquiry back in their setting, researching their practice in cycles of action, reflection, and evaluation. Each month they returned to the Action Learning Group to reflect on and evaluate the actions they had taken, sharing their research stories with the other practitioners, each of whom were undertaking their own inquiries. This process is described and explained in Chapter Seven, showing how the practitioners involved created new knowledge, articulating their evolving theories of practice.

### 3.5.5 The Significance of Dialogue within a Trusting and Supportive Space.

Both approaches to the action research involved the development of a 'Community of Practice' (Wenger 1998), a safe and trusting space where those involved would have the opportunity for social interaction and engagement, and experience connection with one another within a supportive learning environment. Communities of practice can be seen as supporting a process of social learning where people who have a common interest, gather, and collaborate over an extended period of time. Wenger describes communities of practice as being "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly." (Wegner and Wegner 2015:1). Being part of a learning community would



enable individuals to share challenges and discuss possible solutions, stimulating learning and collaborative working to improve practice. Developing communities of practice involves an active process of collective meaning making, through which “reflection takes every person into a leadership space to some extent” (Paige-Smith & Craft, 2008:175). The community of practice provides a forum for discussion, support, and encouragement for everyone involved, to have confidence in their capacity to research into their own practice.

Through dialogue, practitioners explore and critically evaluate different perspectives, pose questions, build on other’s ideas, and participate in shared reasoning and thinking (Mercer, 2019). Creating the right conditions for dialogue to happen must be attempted with care and sensitivity. It takes time for trust to develop, particularly if those involved do not know each other. Ledwith and Springett (2010: 138) observe that:

.... dialogue only truly takes place where there is mutual regard and trust, leading to an openness to having one’s own ideas examined, as well as examining the ideas of others.

Dialogue is different from discussion; the latter is mainly concerned with the exchange of opinions where the flow of ideas is often interrupted as opposing views are defended and standpoints taken up (Senge, 2006). In dialogue a deeper understanding between the people involved is achieved, where there is a free flow of communication, as each person shares their thoughts and ideas, listening attentively to find understanding and points of connection. It creates an openness to learning from mistakes, and through emotional connection helps to deepen understanding of personal, group and wider relationship issues. Dialogue is open-ended, the aim of which is to find common ground (Nagda et al, 2009). It is about meaning making at individual and collective levels and as Ledwith and Springett contend, “without true dialogue there is no participatory practice” (2010:127). In dialogue,

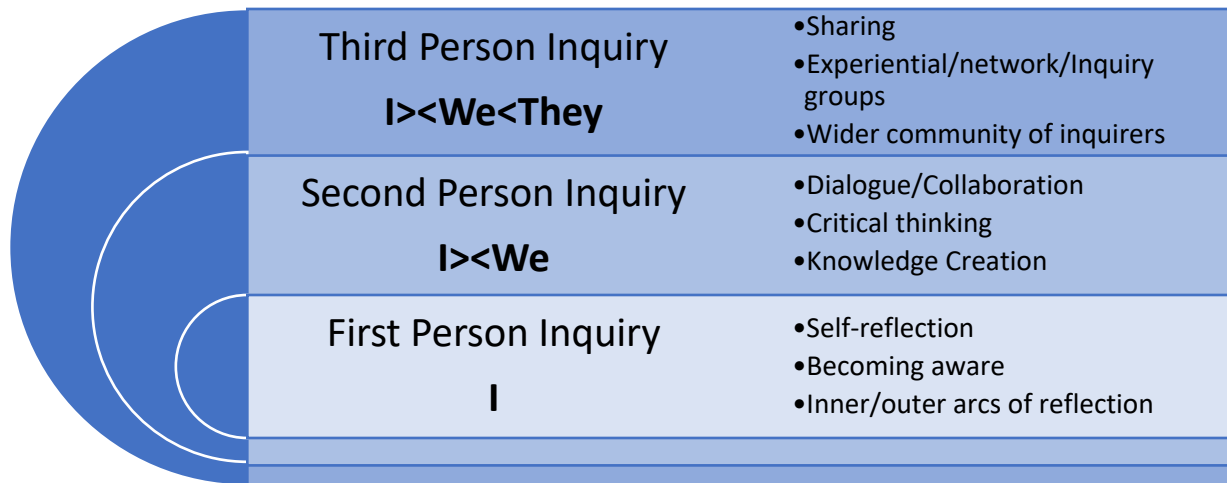
you become more aware of your regular and often hidden thought practices by the mutual questioning of assumptions and prejudices...Insights previously hidden are shared collectively, not contained in one individual... by paying attention and taking care of the spaces between us, we move from interaction to participation in the creation of common meaning.

### 3.5.6 Third Person Inquiry: (I>We><They)

Third person inquiry is concerned with sharing and developing the inquiry with a new and wider audience. It includes “a range of practices which encourage the drawing together the views of large groups of people [to] create a wider community of inquiry” (Reason & McArdle, 2004:3)

Third person inquiry, is concerned with the development of opportunities to network and dialogue with others, influencing those who are not known to the original community of inquirers. In my research, the opportunity for third person inquiry was concerned with identifying and sharing with others the process which enabled early years practitioners, as part of a learning community, to foster a spirit of inquiry and build their own learning to generate new knowledge about how to develop and sustain rich learning environments for young children. By providing inspiration, and sharing our experiences, it was hoped that others may wish to develop such an approach for themselves. Locally, the context for this was at the ‘Step up for 2’s Network’. There was also the opportunity to extend the reach further, during the end of project Conference attended by over 150 people from across the city including practitioners and leaders from other LA’s. Presentations at National Conferences and at EECERA (2021) have also provided a means to share the learning more widely.

The figure below summarises the 3 strands of inquiry that were used. Each of the strategies are interconnected and interdependent, and each strategy was utilised at various stages as the inquiry unfolded:



*Figure 2 Summarising the 3 Strategies of Inquiry*

### 3.6 Validity

A researcher must be able to account for how their research is making a difference, as well as providing a descriptive or explanatory commentary which can be used to influence practice. This means that everyone who sees themselves as a ‘researcher’ needs to be able to account for how their interventions influence the lives of children. The ‘practitioner as researcher’ is in the easiest position from which to do this, as they are working directly with children and will be able to provide an account (with evidence) as to what it is they are doing that promotes the wellbeing and learning of the children in their care. A manager needs to be able to account for how they create a context that enables practitioners in the rooms (also known as keypersons) to improve and account for their practice with their key group of children, in ways that demonstrate the impact of their actions on the wellbeing and learning of the children for whom the setting they manage is responsible.

Statutory requirements are placed upon ECEC settings in terms of recording and reporting desired outcomes in assessment of learning as well as duties about safeguarding and welfare (DfE 2017). The practitioners involved in the project were keen to be able to use this data as

supporting evidence for the impact that their practice is having on individual children, or groups of children. This provides quantitative evidence that is recognised by the regulatory bodies and is given high status within settings. However, as mentioned above, such data focuses on what can be measured, but less tangible areas such as the emotional and dispositional aspects of practice, demonstrated in unique encounters of relational synchronicity, are far more difficult to capture and 'prove', but are no less significant.

In my research I claim that drawing upon subjective, inner knowing is of particular significance in knowledge creation and therefore the evidence base must include qualitative measures such as narrative accounts. It is also important to include photographic and video evidence. The phrase "a picture says a thousand words" seems pertinent here, because often images can capture more effectively the unspoken dimensions and energy of an interaction 'in the moment'. This makes any findings context specific and because of this, leaves this type of research open to criticism to proponents of positivist social science, where findings are justified based on their adherence to quantifiable and replicable principles and methods. In her discussion of practitioner research within her workplace, Cath Arnold outlines the problem when she states that:

Whilst there are still very useful large scale studies designed to demonstrate certain trends, mostly we find human behaviour less predictable than the behaviour of objects. We are trying to interpret what we see and feel to gain information from others who are willing collaborators in our settings and homes. This is often described as being within an 'interpretive paradigm'.... This sort of research is small scale and therefore can make no claim to generalisation beyond the people involved.

(Arnold, 2012:2)

Critics argue that in common with postmodern ethnography, it is increasingly likely that practitioner research "will never be legitimized beyond its own rather narrow orbit." (Adler and Adler, 2008:29) Erickson on the other hand, highlights how if inquiry continues to be

.... grounded in what assumes to be a seamless whole of science and aims to discover general laws of social process that are akin to the laws of physics, that is an enterprise firmly grounded in prose and the literal meaning of things. It will continue to be controverted by the stubborn poetics of everyday life- its rhyming, the nonliteral,

labile meanings inherent in social action, the unexpected twists and turns that belie prediction and control.

(Erickson, 2011:56)

The dualist way of thinking about practice and research as separate, presumes that scientific evidence or knowledge can be discovered and then ‘applied’ to practice in whatever context, ignoring and denying “the stubborn poetics of everyday life”. Moreover, the search for generalisation “when applied to society, often leads to an imposition of general principles in inappropriate contexts” (Ledwith and Springett 2010: 63) thus denying the range and variety of human knowing and experience in various other contexts, and ignoring the complex, contextualised, continually changing situational demands of teaching (Pine 2009). Local context is particularly significant, because ‘what works’ in one situation, does not always translate to effective implementation in another (Joyce & Cartwright, 2019).

Habermas uses the word ‘scientism’ to describe an exaggerated trust in the efficacy of the methods of natural science, it is:

science’s belief in itself: that is, the conviction that we can no longer understand science as one form of possible knowledge, but rather must identify knowledge with science.

(Habermas, 1986:4)

Scientism contends that scientific knowledge is the only form of true knowledge, and that reality only consists of things that can be identified by scientific evidence from experiments and systematic observation. It is clear however, that the scientific method and its tools of objectivity, quantification, and reductionism, are not well-suited for the study of people and the social world (Heshusius, 1986, 1989; Schwandt, 1990; Smith, 1983). People cannot be objectified and then be brought under scientific prediction and control.

When considering research that focuses on people and the social world, I agree with Gallagher when she asserts that “human beings and their social worlds are fundamentally about the individual and collective meanings we bring to our lives and how we make sense of things.” (Gallagher 2015: 208). Furthermore, producing empirical and testable evidence to support

subjective claims to knowledge is problematical because as Jack Whitehead and Jean McNiff explain:

Different kinds of evidence and different kinds of validation processes are used in claims to objective knowledge and claims to subjective knowledge. This has political implications because the methods for testing objective claims to knowledge are held by most research communities as the only legitimate forms, so until recently these forms have been applied to subjective claims to knowledge.

(Whitehead and McNiff, 2006: 33)

In the inquiry, each practitioner researcher committed to answering the following questions to establish impact and evaluate validity of the claims to knowledge and of the impact changes to practice will be making:

- ❖ How do I evaluate the impact of the actions I have had?
- ❖ How do I show that the account I have given of my impact on practice is valid; what evidence do I have to show I have made a demonstrable improvement in providing enriched learning experiences for children?
- ❖ How do I modify my concerns in the light of my evaluation, taking the feedback of others about the quality of my evidence into account?

These questions are developed from Habermas' four criteria for social validity (Habermas 1976) which focus on authenticity, considering questions of

- Comprehensibility (clearly understood by all)
- Truthfulness (in that all recognise the truthfulness of what is said)
- Sincere (so that all parties can trust what is said)
- Appropriate (in terms of context with an awareness of the unspoken cultural norms within which discourses occur.)

(Habermas 1987:2-3).

By using these principles, the rigour of the explanations is strengthened by practitioner researchers collectively when they consider whether the accounts and knowledge claims meet these criteria.

Sometimes those engaging in practitioner led inquiry choose to use external accountability measures to demonstrate improvements in children's learning as the example below shows, indicating how one setting used both quantitative and qualitative data. Talking about the 'Step up for 2's project' and the practitioner led inquiry the setting had undertaken, Chloe, the owner and nursery manager explains how:

*As a team we have been on a journey of improvement which has challenged us to observe and really notice, thinking deeply about what we really need to provide for our children and how to ensure our families feel welcome and experience a sense of belonging. Over this time, we have made many changes which we believe are more than just a quick fix or visual makeover.*

*At individual, room and setting level, a 'spirit of enquiry' has been adopted we introduced an 'I wonder...' board which encourage collaborative approaches amongst the staff team. Using new learning from the action learning group. Many changes were made to the environment which have included:*

*The lighting- more natural light/lamps and dimmer switches*

*Room layout- smaller and more homely spaces created.*

*Physical development- lots more floor space, wider range of opportunities inside and outdoors*

*Emotional well- being – stronger links with home, children experiencing a sense of belonging and feel more secure.*

*Partnership with parents- changes to entrance area, ways to include parents and encourage a sense of belonging and involvement.*

*Now the staff are more able and confident to articulate their pedagogy.*

*This has resulted in:*

- *Improvements in Early Communication scores using EYFS assessment data.*
- *Achieving an 'Outstanding' Ofsted judgement.*

**Chloe (Conference Summary: March 2015)**

### 3.7 Methods

- Oral and Narrative Accounts- Participants have written their own narrative accounts which have been shared within the learning communities. Oral accounts were recorded and transcribed.
- Action Plans- Individual action plans were devised by some of the participants to support developments in their settings.

- Video- some practitioner researchers chose to use video footage in various ways to support their research (e.g. to capture observations of children, discussions with parents, provide details of the setting environment).
- Photographs- photographic evidence of children and the learning environment have been used to support narrative and oral accounts.
- Learning journals- throughout the period of the research, I and some other practitioners used learning journals to record thoughts, feelings, and reflections.

### 3.8 The Politics of Evidence

My understandings about qualitative inquiry have grown and developed since starting my research inquiry. I have begun to question the uncontested way scientific terms such as 'data' are used in qualitative projects. In a thought-provoking interview with Marc Spooner, Norman Denzin, explains how using the phrase "the *politics* of evidence" highlights the contested nature of evidence (Spooner and McNinch, 2018). He explains how science is "no longer just a neutral apparatus, but it is a structure integrated into a larger system of discourse connected to three crises... managerialism, marketing and measurement." (ibid. 42). The implications of this are discussed further in chapter 6 where it is shown how this discourse shapes the regulatory practices and criteria that determine what evidence is and how it is to be used.

Recently, new understandings have developed from increased awareness of colonialism and its impact, with Indigenous scholars articulating their own critical discourse.

Indigenization questions from within the very notions of evidence, of science, of methodology, and of community. As deeply and importantly, Indigenous methodologies remind us that science is moral discourse; it is not a clinical discourse and it is not a discourse based just on evidence, but it is a moral and political discourse.

(ibid: 45)

Becoming aware that science is not neutral but is a moral and political discourse opens different paths, alternative approaches to seeing and making sense of the world. Throughout I have argued that ECEC is situated within a positivist climate of external accountability, based



upon a hierarchical mechanistic view of the world which only recognises as 'real' that which is external and quantifiable, that which can be 'proved' through measurement. Such an approach does not accept that which is internal, unseen but no less 'real'. In the quest to 'prove impact through measurement', a standards agenda and a culture of evidence based practice is failing to account for what is less tangible but no less important such as feelings, intuition, nurturing relationships, creativity, and individual agency (Campbell-Barr, 2018).

However, new discourses have emerged; post-humanist, post-materialist, post-science, informed by "Deleuze, by Guattari, by Barad, by Rancière, and a number of different philosophers of science" (Spooner and McNinch, 2018: 46). This, Denzin argues, is opening up "a major new fresh space" where concepts such as data, analysis, coding, interviewing, and observation are problematised and questioned "as they try to move us forward in a rearticulated space of inquiry and what inquiry means". One of Denzin's arguments is that in qualitative inquiry, the word 'data' should be avoided because it "carries the lingering effects of positivism, positivist science, and the politics of evidence" (ibid: 46). His reasoning resonates with me, and in much the same way that I began to feel uncomfortable about using the word 'quality' after giving more thought to how and why it is used, I now feel an awkwardness about using the word 'data'. This is because the language we use shapes our experience and understanding of the world and, moreover, terms, images and metaphors sustain dominant agendas. Using the word 'data' supports the "well-established intertwining relationship between scientism and neoliberalism" (Walton & Darkes-Sutcliffe, 2023:5) that contributes to a mechanistic view of the universe, one which is founded on the principles of separation, determinism, and reductionism. The authors argue, this means that:

Unless we are able to understand and eradicate the stranglehold that the neoliberal-scientific partnership has on our western psyche, and its expression through a materialist Newtonian worldview, then our efforts to create a different kind of society will remain on the margins.

(ibid)

This realisation informed my choice to consider the practitioners' accounts in an alternative way as explained in the following section.

### 3.8.1 'Research Stories' rather than 'data'.

By engaging with early years practitioners in a process of collaborative and practitioner led-inquiry, it is my claim that within a supportive learning community, as our shared inquiries developed, each of us were able to connect to our subjective personal histories and inner worlds, enabling us to give voice to our stories and together examine our practice with children and families. Learning with and from each other, the practitioners moved from being recipients of theory and change, to becoming generators of change and confident to articulate their theories of practice. Practitioners' accounts, which we called 'research stories', were shared willingly in the group and also with me, in the knowledge that I may use them more widely, such as at educational conferences and in written publications.

As practitioners researching our own practice, our research stories, answered particular questions highlighted in the section above (see \*\* 3.6 Validity) in order to establish impact and validity of the claims to knowledge that were made. As explained earlier, the questions were based upon four criteria for social validity that Habermas developed (Habermas 1976; 1987), with the focus being on the authenticity and truthfulness of the accounts.

I therefore had amassed a wide range of material representation, which demonstrated the professional and personal changes that were occurring. Within the group, this evidence was never called 'data'. The written and narrative accounts were always understood as being 'research stories'. We had not agreed that the practitioners' research stories would be subject to 'data analysis' or other any other forms of evaluation that they would not be involved in or aware of. Even so, when writing up this thesis, I was challenged by the fact that as a member of a collaborative group that was no longer meeting together, how could I decide which research stories I would give priority to in my writing? Like all of the research stories, the story of my inquiry had to be authentic and demonstrate truthfulness, acknowledging that narratives of inquiry are multi-faceted and "provisional constructions of truth... created through active processes of interpretation and self-preservation with individual, interpersonal, social and cultural dimensions " (Marshall 2016: 87).

Working in the field of practitioner inquiry, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009: 103) acknowledge that attempts to represent “complex relational work in ways that do justice to all participants and their diverse perspectives generates a number of very palpable dilemmas”. For example, we were all co-subjects and co-researchers (the researcher and the researched), raising questions about who is entitled to write about whom and the dilemma of who ‘owns the data’. Tricky questions that relate back to the issue of informed consent that had been agreed previously. As the authors highlight:

How can the concept of *a priori* consent be applied to research processes that are largely evolutionary and require the building of trust over time to determine how the design, methods of data collection, and analyses and interpretation of findings will be respectfully and fairly orchestrated?

(ibid 2009: 104)

It therefore came down to the trust that had been developed within the group and over time- the practitioners’ trust in me (as the one who would use their research stories to answer my research question), that I would use them fairly and respectfully. The enormous amount of evidence generated by the practitioners researching their own practice in their various contexts, meant that it was impossible to include *all* the research stories that were shared. Impossible too, for my account to include the numerous shifts in practitioner understanding which had been made visible in their stories. I therefore had to make choices as to which practitioner narratives would exemplify particular issues. For example, Chapter 5, uses several practitioner accounts which reflect the understanding and growing confidence to emerge within the group. Likewise in Chapter 7, elements of several different research stories are used to demonstrate how the process of practitioner led-inquiry made an experiential difference to children's well-being and learning through more attuned relationships, enabling pedagogic spaces, and strengthened parental engagement. The narrative accounts and research stories were chosen to authentically reflect the beliefs and values of the group. This can be seen in the research story that Chloe wrote (see \*\*7.5 Cluster One- Enabling Environments) which I selected because it demonstrated the many changes (as well as the challenges) within her setting that had taken place over a period of nearly a year. For continuity, Chloe’s nursery was

also one of the 3 settings I visited in 2023 in order to gather recollections of the project and to determine whether its influence had been sustained beyond the life of the projects. The 3 settings that were visited reflected different levels of attendance at the groups. Caroline was only able to take part in the Collaborative Inquiry. Ada had attended both the Collaborative Inquiry and the 'Step up for Two's' project, whilst Chloe had taken part in the 'Step up for Two's Project' only. All of our discussions were recorded, transcribed and agreed as being accurate accounts. These recorded conversations were used as the basis for the evaluation of impact captured in \*\*Chapter Eight.

Brew (2001) wisely noted that being a researcher is a way of being, and acting with authenticity- it is a continuing process of becoming aware. In the next section, the importance of ethics and being ethically aware is discussed where the relationship between the researcher and the researched is viewed as an ethical way of being in the world. Using practitioner's research stories, not as 'data', but as a means of democratic meaning making (Moss, 2019), a way to understand and make sense of the individual and collective meanings we bring to our lives (Gallagher, 2015).

### 3.9 Research as Ethical Practice

From the beginning, my hope was for my research to be collaborative, founded on democratic values and purpose; reflecting the understanding of Dewey, who saw democracy as more than a form of government, but as a way of living together, informed by a working faith in the possibilities of human nature (Dewey, 1938). Ethical responsibility in research is of paramount importance, going beyond the organisational requirements of completing an ethics form or the narrow adherence to a set of criteria. It is a process that should take place through every part of the research, requiring deep thought and care. (Brew 2001; BERA 2011). Ethics asks questions about how morality is applied so that:

We must consider the rightness or wrongness of our actions as qualitative researchers in relation to the people whose lives we are studying, to our colleagues, and to those who sponsor our work . . . Naiveté [about ethics] itself is unethical.

(Miles and Huberman, 1994:288)

During my research, perhaps I was naïve at certain points in my inquiry. As explained below, even although I believed I had given sufficient forethought to ethical requirements, it was only during the course of the research, working with participants in ways that I thought to be ethically responsive and responsible, that dilemmas did arise. These caused me to pause and reflect more deeply on the ethics of my actions and the approaches that were taken. Angela Brew (2001) argues that the researcher's awareness must be explicitly recognised as a growing and developing part of research, and regarding the area of ethics, this means "taking into account the mystery of our participation, not blindly assuming that we have control over it" (ibid: 103) emphasising how:

the shift from a detached consciousness to a self-reflective and aware consciousness is nowhere more needed than in the area of the ethics of research...for ethical issues must be resolved in the context of the research design itself.

(ibid:103)

Possessing an "aware consciousness" is essential in qualitative inquiry, and accords with Heshusius's perception of ethics and epistemology as inseparable within a participatory mode of consciousness, beginning by questioning

.... whether we accept individuation, individuality, and independent identity as the starting point for inquiry (characterisations of the self-other relationship fundamental to the western mindset), or whether we understand the concept of self as epistemologically related to other through self-other unity.

(Heshusius, 1994: 17)

To understand this, to comprehend that the relationship between researcher and researched need not be, (and indeed cannot be) one of detachment, involves the recognition that each of us as individuals are connected, epistemologically related through *selfother* unity. And in

separating 'self' from 'other' the possibilities of what can be understood are restricted because, in the words of Heshusius:

The act of self-distancing.... denies us the wholeness that comes from being connected, having a kinship with who and what we come to know. Imposing separation or creating the 'experience of I as separate from the world' serves to block full perception of other.  
(ibid:16)

Adopting a participatory mode of consciousness means that research or inquiry, is not a way of doing, but a way of being- where the entanglement of 'research' and 'being' is acknowledged. As a researcher inquiring into my own practice - a practitioner-researcher, my actions as researcher therefore reflect my way of being in my professional work, and in my personal life as personhood cannot be left behind (Stanley and Wise, 2002). Relational ways of working and being, need not be 'left at the door' as the mantle of 'researcher' is taken up. The research process itself is a relational and ethical endeavour, requiring deep reflection on role, position, power, and perspective not only when gathering evidence but also in its interpretation. (Kumpulainen, 2023).

### 3.9.1 An Ethics of Care

In *'Ethics and Politics in Early Childhood Education'* Dahlberg and Moss (2005) explore the possibilities of early childhood settings, rather than sites of technical practice, becoming spaces or forums for ethical and political practice, "'a loci of ethical practice' and 'minor politics'" (ibid: 2). They offer alternative ways of conceptualising and practising early childhood services, and their writing has contributed to deepening my understanding not only of early years practice, but of research as ethical practice. Drawing on the work of feminist scholars such as Tronto (1993) and Sevenhuijsen (1998), Dahlberg and Moss (2005) describe "an ethics of care" (ibid:78), which is concerned with "responsibilities and relationships rather than rules and rights" and instead of being formal and abstract, relates to particular situations and is a "moral activity rather than a set of principles to follow" (ibid:75). An ethics of care is described by Joan Tronto as

a practice rather than a set of rules or principles...It involves particular acts of caring and "*a general habit of mind*" to care that should inform all aspects of moral life.

(cited in Dahlberg and Moss, 2005: 74)

The ethics of care defines a relationship which includes "attentiveness, responsibility, competence and responsiveness." (ibid). In her research in two inner city children's centres, Liz Brooker (2015) draws on the ethics of care to develop her conceptualisation of a 'triangle of care'. And in a recent article co-written with Joan Walton, we also discussed this in relation to the key person role and creating a 'triangle of trust' between child, parent, and key person (Walton & Darkes-Sutcliffe 2023). However, the ethics of care, should not just be restricted to those in caring professions but as Tronto contends above, "should inform all aspects of moral life". This means that a researcher has an ethical responsibility to 'care' for those that he or she researches, through demonstrating attentiveness, responsiveness, and competence. Listening to the other, respecting and responding to their difference.

Responsiveness suggests a different way to understand the needs of others rather than to put ourselves into their position.... [O]ne is engaged from the standpoint of the other, but not by presuming the Other is exactly like the self.

(cited in Dahlberg and Moss, 2005: 83)

This reflects what Heshusius proposes, that the boundaries between self and other are not fixed, or clearly demarcated but permeable and changing, and involve "letting go of the idea of being-separate-and-in-charge altogether" (Heshusius, 1994: 18)

When the mode of consciousness one enters is participatory, that is, when the concerns with the self have been let go, total attentiveness can occur. The boundaries between self and other blur: The self and other are not, by definition, separate, and distinct. There is no fixed core between self and other.

(Heshusius, 1995:121)

There is however relationship, connection and awareness of a "deeper level of kinship between the knower and the known" (Heshusius, 1994:16) Accordingly I view the relationship between the researcher and the researched as an ethical way of being in the world, one which involves developing a way of seeing, listening, and connecting with others to understand the individual

and collective meanings we bring to our lives and how we make sense of these (Gallagher, 2015)

### 3.9.2 A Framework for Considering 'The Ethical'

In her paper, '*Qualitative Quality: Eight "Big-Tent" Criteria for Excellent Qualitative Research*' Sarah Tracy (2010) presents a flexible model of eight key markers for quality in qualitative research. Her rationale, whilst making a case for such markers, "also leaves room for dialogue, imagination, growth and improvisation" (ibid: 837). One of the eight criteria she considers is "The Ethical", devising a framework for considering ethical issues that may arise in qualitative research. Tracy identifies four ethical dimensions that research should consider:

- 1) Procedural ethics
- 2) Situational and culturally specific ethics
- 3) Relational ethics
- 4) Exiting ethics.

These dimensions are inter-linked, but it is helpful to use Tracy's framework to explain and differentiate between some issues that arose during the course of the inquiry.

### 3.9.3 Procedural ethics

This relates to the formal process of following the procedures of the university that is responsible for the research. My proposal to the Ethics Committee at York St John University, met the requirements to ensure that I was adhering to the appropriate standards. This included a participant information sheet and a consent form, outlining the aims of the research, and that the participation of those involved was voluntary. Assurance that the identity of participants would remain confidential and that they had a right to withdraw their informed consent at any time. Other safeguards were also in place to ensure that we were engaged in a reliable and transparent process. Protection for confidentiality was met by a commitment to keep all



personal data, including recordings and transcriptions, in secure locations, destroying such data when the research was completed.

This seemed clear and simple at first, but as the Collaborative Inquiry (CI) involved each of us as co-subjects and co-researchers (Heron, 1996), the question arose as to who exactly 'owned the data'. The research was collaborative, involving working with practitioners, not on or about them, and each individual co-researcher produced their own 'data' in the form of their research story. It must be acknowledged however, that in every research encounter, there is a power relationship (Brew 2001). For example, it would be Joan, and later me (for this thesis) who would use the data generated and write up the research and speak about the inquiry more widely, for example in Conferences or at events for education professionals. The practitioners had agreed to share their research stories with the group and sent their observations, action plans, photographs and other representations to Joan and myself. Some chose to keep a journal to document their thoughts and feelings, which we were given access to. Aware that such actions raise questions of power, prompted us to open up discussion of positionality to make the issue of 'power' more explicit. Attention was drawn to the nature and range of the data that would be produced by the practitioners back in their settings. This often-involved written narratives including observations of children and discussions with parents and team members. Photographs and video recordings sometimes were shared. We discussed this at length as a group, and co-created an ethical protocol together, which was called 'The Learning Contract' which can be seen in \*\*Appendix Two. Informed parental consent was addressed by each of the practitioners in their own setting involving individual discussion with the parents and/or carers about the project. This satisfied university requirements but was also inclusive of the practitioners.

With regard to confidentiality, in a group situation this is difficult to fully guarantee. As researchers we are limited in our ability to ensure that everyone abides by the ethical protocol that has been agreed; we will not know if someone shares something outside of the group. Each of us is responsible for our own actions, but by constructing a safe and trustworthy space,

and everyone agreeing to the ethical protocol that had been constructed together, I trusted that all involved had regard to the ethic of confidentiality. Together we agreed that:

- *In order for there to be maximum learning and value to be experienced from this project, it is important that we build an atmosphere of trust, where each of us can feel free to talk about our different experiences and feelings in a variety of situations, including naming people and / or organisations.*
- *In order to create a context that allows this, we agree that what is said within the group concerning personal/ individual experience is confidential; there will be no sharing of those experiences with others outside of the group, unless there is explicit permission by that person to do so.*
- *Any writing or other output from individuals within the collaborative inquiry will be shared with all group members for comment/ amendments before being disseminated outside of the group.*
- *Any factual information that is spoken about in the group that is universally available, such as changes in legislation, can of course be spoken about elsewhere.*

**Extract from Learning Contract**

All were aware that some 'data' may be shared more widely. Everyone agreed and, in fact, wanted our work together to be discussed at conferences, and written up in journal articles or in professional magazines. The reason given for this was that the practitioners felt that their work as professional educators contributing to the care and well-being of children should be more widely recognised and valued.

This was also the case in the third phase of the research where those involved in the 'Action Learning Clusters' had also generated accounts of their practitioner-led inquiries. They shared their evidence and representations in the clusters, with their group facilitators and with me as the project leader. Many of them went on to share their learning with other settings in the "Step-up for 2's Network " and the "Researching our Own Practice" Conference at the end of project. This was their data, it did not belong to me, and therefore the question of destroying it after the end of the project was unworkable.

Regarding anonymity, as agreed all names of practitioners, children and parents, colleagues and settings were changed and it is not possible to identify who has said what, or what setting they belong to. However, in writing up this thesis, the names of the facilitators of the Action Learning Clusters have been revealed. This was done after much thought and was discussed with each facilitator. Elizabeth, Julia, and Kay all agreed and gave their permission. The name of the Local Council that I worked for is named in this writing, but names of individuals within the LA have been anonymised.

### 3.9.4 Situational ethics

Tracy explains that situational ethics refers to practices that arise from the unique context in which the research project takes place. She cites Ellis (2007:4) who says that a situational ethic relates to "the unpredictable, often subtle, yet ethically important moments that come up in the field." Situational ethics recognises that each context is different and that researchers must continually reflect, and question whether the end result justifies the processes that take place along the way. Tracy asserts that such responsibilities "go beyond review boards and beyond edicts like "the greater good" and "do no harm." (Tracy, 2010: 847). This insight which also links to aspects of relational ethics discussed below, regarding a session of the CI, an incident, a moment only perhaps, when I felt that a boundary may have been crossed and wondered whether I had not upheld the responsibility to 'do no harm'. As the CI got established, trust had been developed within the group. We shared our experiences, talking about how we felt as children, the influences on us. Some of the group revealed how they had been bullied or had struggled at school which had caused them to lose confidence and have poor self-esteem, continuing even into their adult lives. The discussions at times got quite emotional and it became clear that some of the memories were painful to recall. I had not expected this, yet I knew this was significant to the research as the practitioners surfaced their personal knowing. When Joanne started to explain why as a manager, she was so passionate about looking after all those in her care, in that moment she realised that for her it was more than a role she took on, it was a strong '*need*'. She began to quietly cry and seeing this and hearing what she had to

say, affected all of us in the group. She explained through her tears, that she had always wanted to have children of her own but never could, so that for her, ensuring that the children and the staff in her setting were given the best support and care she could give them was immensely important. She was revealing something very personal, very deep and I wondered whether there would be any consequences for her later in terms of psychological trauma, or that her openness was something she would possibly regret later. Joanne recalled:

*"I remember feeling suddenly tearful as the realisation hit me that I had been deprived of motherhood and how much it had meant to me even though I had suppressed those thoughts for many years."* I waited until after the session and later that day went to talk to Joanne privately about what had happened. She told me that she wasn't ashamed or worried, and that it had actually been a relief to talk about it. She felt that it had been 'helpful' as she could now see that this loss, had made her who she was, and had motivated her to do the best she could for the children she had the responsibility for in her nursery. Later Joanne, in her feedback account, wrote about this incident. This can be seen in the following chapter, where the role of emotions and \*\* 4.6 Embodied Knowledge is discussed.

In ethical terms, had Joanne's distress caused her harm? Did the ends justify the means? After reflection, and discussion with Joanne herself, I understood that although Joanne's expression of such deep feelings was unexpected, it was because it had been uncomfortable for me to witness, it was something beyond my control. I did not know what to say as I did not want to offer empty platitudes, but what she shared was important. I needed to listen, to respect, to understand, and act as a container for her distress. Not only I, but as a group, we provided support and connection. We therefore concluded that the end did justify the means and with Joanne's agreement, this incident would not be omitted from the research.

### 3.9.5 Relational ethics

Relational ethics involves "ethical self-consciousness in which researchers are mindful of their character, actions, and consequences on others" (Tracy, 2010: 847). Tracy explains how Christians (2005) introduced the concept of feminist communitarianism, a philosophical

approach that “stresses the primacy of relationships, compassion, nurturance, affection, promise keeping, and intimacy” (ibid). This has much in common with an ‘ethics of care’ which I described above and reminds us of the need to consider each individual, that the participants involved are not a homogenous group. We are all unique people, complex beings, with a multitude of thoughts and feelings always going on inside us. Each individual may have particular worries, doubts or fears, and will be selective about which of these we choose to share and with whom. Anita, a key person, and Early Years SENCO, was a quieter member of the group, but after the end of the third session, she approached Joan and me. She said she was sorry, but no longer wanted to be involved in the CI and wanted to withdraw from the project. We were both rather surprised but reassured her that it was fine and that we respected her wishes. Unfortunately, time pressures meant we were unable to enter a further discussion at that point, so Joan asked her if we could visit her later that week to talk with her. Ethically this was a dilemma. Was visiting Anita a form of persuasion? How did she feel? Would she worry that we would pressurise her to re-consider? Would it not be best to just leave it and carry on the CI without her? Difficult questions to answer without reaching out to Anita, to meet with her, to see her, to listen, to understand. Working in a relational way meant that we wanted to do this, not in an attempt to persuade her back, but because Anita’s decision was affecting us too and we felt close to her and wanted to understand why she no longer wanted to be part of the group. We also cared about her well-being.

When we went to see Anita, she seemed pleased to see us. She said that she had been enjoying the meetings but explained that she felt that she had nothing to offer the group. She also didn’t feel confident to contribute written accounts of her thoughts and feelings and did not know how her being there would help the research. We listened and talked with her for a while, acknowledging her feelings, conscious of not exerting pressure on her to change her mind. We talked about how important the insights and understandings of all those in the group were; how we believed that she too was part of this and how her work with the children was significant. We also mentioned other ways of contributing to the project, oral narratives for example, using other media etc. and that we truly believed that she did have much to give- that

her opinions, thoughts, and ideas were indeed valued. We were delighted when Anita did come to the next meeting and made the decision to continue with the CI. This example, I believe, illustrates the significance of a relational way of working. Making time to talk with Anita, realising that her reluctance to carry on with the CI, had stemmed from a lack of belief in her worth, for at this point, she was unable recognise the value of what she did. It also demonstrates how in qualitative research inquiries, researchers need an 'aware consciousness', and that qualities such as compassion, affection and care do have a place in how research is carried out.

At the end of the project Conference, Anita talked in front of the whole audience about what taking part in the CI had meant to her:

*"At one point in the enquiry I wanted to pull out. I didn't see what I could do that would make a difference.... Joan asked me to write something about what I do on a moment-by-moment basis in my work setting. Somehow it turned into a poem. Lots of people gave me positive comments about it and it was published in a childcare magazine – it was nice to think that others had valued my opinions. By taking part in this enquiry my confidence has improved and hopefully this will improve my practice. It's been great to work with a range of practitioners from all over the city and to share our knowledge and Yes, our expertise!!"*

Anita's full account can be seen in \*\*Appendix Three.

Anita's decision to carry on with the CI and the consequent shift in her thinking, her belief in herself and in the value of what she was doing, served as an encouragement to me- that my research inquiry, this collaborative way of working with the practitioners was significant to showing how Early Years Practitioners were creators of knowledge.

### 3.9.6 Exiting Ethics

The fourth category Tracy (2010) refers to is what happens beyond data collection. It considers the situation that exists when the formal research ends, and the results are written up and

disseminated. It has been a long time since both the CI and the practitioner-led inquiries ended. The Conferences at the conclusion of each project provided a way that ensured that the practitioners were included and that their contributions were shared and valued. Joan also wrote a journal article '*A collaborative inquiry: 'how do we improve our practice with children?*' (Walton, 2011) a copy of which was shared with the group. My thesis has been a long time in the writing, but I have been able to contact all those involved, sharing with them the narratives and representations I have used. Perhaps there was no need to do this, because after all, each participant had given their consent for any data to be shared at the time. Yet it felt like something that I should do, something that just felt right, a relational and ethical way of being. It is as Heshusius says-

When one forgets self and becomes embedded in what one wants to understand, there is an affirmative quality of kinship that no longer allows for privileged status. It renders the act of knowing an ethical act.

(Heshusius, 1994: 19)

This chapter has outlined the methodology for my research, a qualitative inquiry, situated within a participative paradigm (Heron, 1996). I gave a brief overview of the historical developments in action research, providing a rationale for using first, second and third person action research. I offered a description of Collaborative Inquiry and Practitioner-led inquiry as the methodological approaches chosen, using 'methodological inventiveness' to guide my inquiry. I went on to examine the relationship between researcher and the researched, explaining how important dialogue and critical reflection, in a safe and trusting collaborative space, are to inquiry. I also considered ways of capturing validity in subjective claims to knowledge, developing my discussion to highlight the politics of evidence. I further developed my argument in relation to the significance of a participatory mode of consciousness (Heshusius, 1994) and how this relates to knowledge and coming to know. This led me to a consideration of an ethics of care and the ethics of research, concluding that research practice should be an ethical way of being in the world.

In the next chapter, I will argue for an epistemology of practice which reflects more than a passive role for practitioners as consumers of knowledge, but which includes the role of the practitioner in creating knowledge for the improvement of teaching and learning (Pine, 2009). I explore what different kinds of knowledge early years practitioners need when carrying out their work, examining the concept of 'A Basket of Knowledges' (Campbell Barr, 2019). Drawing upon Heron's extended epistemology to embrace four ways of knowing (Heron, 1996), I highlight how utilising subjective, inner knowing is of particular significance in knowledge creation.



## **Chapter Four**

### **Epistemology of Practice**

“What is the kind of knowing in which competent practitioners engage? How is professional knowing like and unlike the kinds of knowing presented in academic textbooks, scientific papers and learned journals?”

(Schön, 1983: viii)

In this chapter, I examine the nature of knowledge and coming to know, arguing for an epistemology of practice which reflects more than a passive role for practitioners as consumers of knowledge, but which includes the role of the practitioner in creating knowledge for the improvement of teaching and learning (Pine, 2009). I demonstrate how by adopting a relational epistemology in collaboration with others, relational forms of knowing and coming to know are valued. Such an approach contrasts with individual descriptions of knowledge which have dominated western epistemological theories for so long (Thayer-Bacon, 2010), which leads me to a consideration of knowledge democracy. I move on to explore the different kinds of knowledge early years practitioners need when carrying out their work, focusing on the idea of 'A Basket of Knowledges', a term Verity Campbell-Barr (Campbell-Barr, 2018; 2019) uses to conceptualise the pluralised and multifaceted nature of professional knowledge in ECEC. I conclude the chapter by offering an analysis of John Heron's model of an extended epistemology of knowledge, which embraces four ways of knowing (Heron, 1996) highlighting how utilising subjective, inner knowing is of particular significance in knowledge creation.

## 4.1 Multiple Truths and Many Ways of Knowing.

The preceding chapter, explained my ontological understanding, showing how my values of inclusion, equality, and fairness cause me to question and challenge the separation of the knower and the known, the I and the other, and embrace a participatory world view, acknowledging that the world we experience as reality, to be subjective objective (Heron, 1996). Taking this perspective enables me to recognise a world not of separate things, but of relationships which we co-author (Reason, 1998), valuing interdependence and collaboration in a dynamic process which is fluid and living. From my ontology emerges an epistemology that recognises that because of our shared humanity, each person is of equal worth, separate in identity but also connected as part of a greater whole, and that there are many ways of knowing, thinking, and being moral (Hall, 1996). An epistemology that recognises the importance of embodied knowledge (Whitehead & McNiff 2006), and tacit knowing (Polanyi, 1958); where personal discovery and learning are seen as a way of bringing to life human

potential, and where each person is viewed as an equal participant in the world and as a co-creator of reality. This places importance on participative and interactive relationships in line with my desire to adopt a more life enhancing concept of leadership both in my practice and in my research.

Adopting a participatory worldview provides a different and transformative perspective through which to see knowledge construction and learning (Pine 2009). It challenges the modernist belief in universal truths and scientific neutrality with one which is context-specific and value-laden (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 2013). It encompasses the belief that there is no 'one Truth' but many ways of experiencing and understanding the world, as well as different ways of knowing, providing "routes to multiple subordinated truths" (Ledwith and Springett, 2010: 17).

The issue of epistemology, how we make sense of the world and make meaning, is of immense significance, and the recognition that there are multiple knowledges and truths with many ways of knowing, must also suggest that there should also be different ways of investigating the world, approaches that can accommodate uncertainty, uniqueness, complexity and change (Anderson 2019; Pine 2009). Describing the 'crisis of confidence' in the social sciences in the later part of the twentieth century, Bochner describes how he became increasingly aware of the limitations of the social sciences and began to question whether "master narratives were either possible or desirable" (Ellis and Bochner, 2000: 735). Bochner explains how the work of poststructuralist and deconstructivist writers obliterated the modernist concept of author and opened up the interpretive space of the reader so that it was broadened-

...encouraging multiple perspectives, unsettled meanings, plural voices, and local and illegitimate knowledges that transgress against the claims of a unitary body of theory.  
(ibid: 735)

To understand why some knowledges can be seen as 'illegitimate', Brew's (2001) explanation provides some illumination, when she argues for the need to look at the process of how we come to know and understand as a phenomenon of our experience, shifting the

emphasis away from manifestations of the conception of knowledge as store of information, a unitary body of theory. We need an epistemology of practice that:

...avoids the three dichotomies of scientific positivistic research: the separation of means from ends, the separation of research from practice, and the separation of knowing from doing.

(Schön, 1983:165)

This change in ideas about knowledge, moves the terrain away from the implicit assumptions that we can know what truth is and can know what is true, towards the idea that "understanding what truth is and creating it or discovering it, is part and parcel of our individual and collective inquiries" (Brew, 2001:101). Such an approach opens other possibilities for understanding so that:

If we question the world around us and begin to explore values of equality and connection with the whole of life on earth, this will lead us to different ways of knowing, and in turn, to different ways of being. In these ways, epistemologies and ontologies, are part of a living theory, or practical theory that evolves from everyday life in order to transform the way things are for the better.

(Ledwith and Springett, 2010: 158)

## 4.2 Knowledge Democracy

Can early years settings be a place where knowledge can be generated, where practitioners can see themselves as creators of knowledge, and go beyond being receivers of knowledge generated from academic research? This was a possibility that I wanted to explore through my inquiry and I found resonance in the questions of Schön who likewise considered:

What is the kind of knowing in which competent practitioners engage? How is professional knowing like and unlike the kinds of knowing presented in academic textbooks, scientific papers and learned journals?

(Schön, 1983: viii)

Finding answers to this, means giving greater consideration to ideas about knowledge itself. Linked to the struggle for global social justice, 'Knowledge Democracy', is a growing narrative which asserts that an "intellectual abyss" exists which is hindering human progress. This occurs,

argues de Sousa Santos, because “in granting to modern science the monopoly of the universal distinction between true and false” the maintenance of unequal knowledge hierarchies is maintained to the “detriment of alternative bodies of knowledge” (de Sousa Santos, 2007: 47).

It is a huge divide separating:

...the visible constituents of knowledge and power from those who are invisible.  
Popular, lay, plebian, peasant, Indigenous, the knowledge of disabled people  
themselves, and more cannot be fitted in any ways of knowing on “this side of the line”.  
(Hall, 2018:91)

There are many different experiences of living in the world and many different ways of making sense of the world, and “any practice which claims to be predicated on equality and justice has to heed these diverse ways of knowing and being in the world” (Ledwith and Springett, 2010: 109), engaging critically with both theory and practice. Knowledge democracy is multi-faceted and has at its basis the acknowledgment of the importance of multiple epistemologies or ways of knowing. It affirms that “knowledge is created in multiple forms” (Hall, 2018:93) and is a

powerful tool for taking action in social movements and elsewhere to deepen  
democracy and to struggle for a fairer and healthier world... Knowledge democracy is  
about intentionally linking values of justice, fairness and action to the process of using  
knowledge.

(ibid: 93)

One of the first steps in my inquiry was to consider my own values, recognising that these influenced the choices I made in my research. I wanted to ensure that my research was ‘democratic’, motivated by the frustration and disempowerment I had witnessed in so many of the early years practitioners that I had worked with. I felt a deep sense of injustice about that. I was drawn to participative research methodologies and collaborative approaches to research because here the emphasis was on democratic ways of working and what connected people, not what separated them. It was only as my research has progressed that I have begun to understand why certain forms of knowledge are seen as ‘illegitimate’ by some, and to consider the effect of enduring legacies of colonialism to the maintenance of unequal knowledge

hierarchies. Unequal knowledge hierarchies also exert pressure on the work of practitioners.

The epistemological hierarchy in our field [ECEC] consists of distinct layers, where the professional body of knowledge is produced (academic research, scholarly debate), transferred (professional preparation, pre- and in-service training) and applied (practice). There is a powerful top-down stream of knowledge presented as relevant for practice, and a similar downstream of expectations and advice about what needs to be done at the practice levels of the hierarchy. This layout of the early childhood professional system constantly increases the pressure on practitioners, who, finding themselves at the bottom of the epistemological hierarchy, have to meet these expectations imposed on them.

(Urban, 2008:141)

In contrast to this, I contend that through experience of their work with children and families, early years practitioners have gathered implicit and explicit knowledge, valuable knowing that should be recognised and built upon. As outlined earlier, the main aim of my research is to create a process whereby early years practitioners become aware of and articulate this knowledge and generate new knowledge about how to create and sustain rich and nurturing learning environments for young children, through building their own learning, to become knowledge creators within a learning community. Schön argued that new knowledge which can be applied in practice would not be created from 'espoused theories' (Argyris and Schön, 1974), but that it needed to arise from practice itself "the scholarship of application means the generation of knowledge for, and from, action" (Schön, 1995: 31).

### 4.3 Action Research- including the voices and perspectives of all.

The opportunity to develop an action research project and to find a new way of working with the practitioners, presented me with many challenges. In the previous chapter I explained that in line with my desire for the research to be collaborative, my inquiry had to begin by looking at myself as the one instigating the research, and act with awareness about my motivations, instincts and purpose (Ledwith and Springett 2010; Marshall 2014). This meant taking a critical stance toward my own position and power as the one initiating the research. For the research

to be participatory, I knew that it had to include the voices and perspectives of all involved, engaging with multiple truths and multiple ways of knowing (Kemmis, 2006).

From my reflections emerged a key question:

- How do I recognise and respect the different knowledge and ways of knowing within the group?

To answer this, firstly I had to confront an unpleasant realisation, something that at the time left me feeling conflicted. I had worked hard to gain my degree and post-graduate qualifications, studied throughout my teaching career to increase my knowledge and understanding, and if I were honest, felt that I had acquired more knowledge about early years practice than many of the others. Yet did all that matter? Such egotistical thinking was in contrast to the words of Paulo Freire that had so inspired me:

Men and women who lack humility (or have lost it) cannot come to the people, cannot be their partners in naming the world.

(Freire, 1970/1993: 63)

I appreciated that to be collaborative, the starting point for this inquiry was not about how much studying had been done, how many qualifications had been gained, what roles each of us had in the workplace; this was about recognising and respecting the different perspectives, experience, knowledge and understandings that each person brought to the group and connecting with that. Central to this was my belief that those working with the youngest children on a daily basis hold and create valuable knowledge about what is needed to improve the well-being of children. I therefore recognised, that my hierarchical thinking stood in opposition to what I was striving to do, and that for this approach to work, I had to surrender any 'power' that I thought I had.

Concepts of mutuality and reciprocity are only possible if we relinquish power, in the belief that others are fully capable, autonomous human beings who can join us as equals, as co-creators of change, in mutual reciprocal engagement in a process of search, re-search and, of action and reflection.

(Ledwith and Springett, 2010: 20)

Undertaking the CI provided a forum for “mutual reciprocal engagement” (ibid) as it was a process which values the skills, knowledge, experience, and competence of practitioners, where each of us were co-equals and co-partners in our inquiry (Heron, 1996). It allowed us to draw upon our knowledge and experience, enabling us to recognise our ability to identify problems and critically reflect on our actions and share our stories with one another. In seeking to answer my first question 'How do I recognise and respect the different knowledge and ways of knowing within the group?' I begin by examining some of the elements of the 'knowledge base' for ECEC and the implications of this for the research inquiry.

#### 4.4 ECEC- A rich and varied range of knowledge

Internationally, agreement exists that ECEC is multi-disciplinary, with those working with the youngest children requiring understanding of a range of disciplines to inform their practice. For example, Brock (2013) identifies knowledge on child development, curriculum and pedagogy and Dalli (2014) writes of the diverse knowledge of those who work with young children, which encompasses specialist knowledge of child development and curriculum, whilst also drawing on wider disciplines such as health, developmental psychology, social policy, cultural studies, family studies and social sciences more generally.

In her paper, *'Professional knowledges for early childhood education and care'* Verity Campbell-Barr (2019), makes a significant contribution to the discussion about what constitutes the 'knowledge-base' for those working in ECEC. Her rationale is that ECEC is a knowledgeable profession, requiring rich and varied forms of knowledge, which extend from the theoretical to more practical 'every day' knowledge. She argues that it is through identifying the range of 'knowledges' that the complexities of working in ECEC can be appreciated. Campbell-Barr asserts that how the knowledge base is understood and valued, is deeply connected to the debates on quality and child outcomes because the knowledge, skills and attitudes for the profession are linked to socio-political constructions of the role and purpose of those working in ECEC. She questions, for example, the taken for granted



assumptions made about the 'natural' caring role of the (mostly female) workforce showing how modelling behaviours on a 'mother like-ideal' is likely to reinforce gender segregation. She refutes the idea that being caring (a role which is aligned with feminine characteristics) requires innate embodied characteristics, arguing that it is socially constructed.

Far from being innate, the moral behaviours for ECEC are socially constructed, embedded in understanding the other (both the individual and universal), and learned through interactions with those also undertaking their training, with experiences of being in the workplace, and with broader (gendered) messages of right and wrong behaviours.

(Campbell-Barr, 2019:139)

#### 4.4.1 Too subjective and slippery?

Campbell-Barr believes that the modernist pre-occupation with qualification levels silences questions about the knowledge required of ECEC professionals. She contrasts the technocratic models of professionalism, informed by top-down, bureaucratic processes that favour observable and knowable attributes, with models of professionalism that foreground 'a more ethical construct' derived from practitioner perspectives and encompassing more tacit forms of knowledge. For example, Noddings (2003) describes an ethic of care as a relational and inter-subjective activity, as it relies on the caregiver and the one receiving care being in a reciprocal relationship with each other, thus challenging the widely held view of caring as a subject-object act, with care being directed from the carer to those who are being cared for. Jools Page (2018) builds upon this understanding in her conceptualisation of 'Professional Love':

young children crave relationships with adults who understand them and who will not reject their bids for attention, i.e. babies and young children need care-givers who will 'listen' and who are able to 'tune into' them in a multitude of ways. This is not because these adults are paid to care give but because they are compelled to respond with care and eventually with love that is formed over time within the context of closely attached relationships.

(ibid 2018 :131)

An ethic of care is a competing narrative, a counter discourse to the narratives that support technocratic solutions to working with children which depend on adherence to rules. An ethic of care recognises that it is not about one correct response at a particular time, in a particular

situation, but that there could be many different ways to respond at any given time, ways which are flexible according to the situation faced. In a positivistic paradigm, as Campbell-Barr points out, this is risky business because:

the absence of rules positions the ethic of care (and the encompassing attitudinal and dispositional characteristics) as outside modernist constructs of professionalism and illustrates the silencing of the knowledge-base that comes from ECEC professionals in the technocratic models of policy makers.

(Campbell-Barr, 2018:82)

She highlights how that the lack of a coherent language for the ethic of care limits its articulation and distribution and that it risks being seen to be "too subjective and slippery for it to warrant legitimisation within modernist constructs" (ibid :81). In perspectives that seek control and order, (and by inference seek to control and order), concepts like 'caring' which cannot be accurately measured and governed by rules, are not easily grasped. Like a fish, it slips through the fingers, jumping back into the sea, away, assigned to the depths and need not be worried about. Post-modern perspectives, however, engage with issues of complexity and uncertainty. The word 'care' is contained in the phrase 'an ethic of care', because care and the act of caring cannot be reduced to a set of rules that are adhered to; rather, it is an ethical way of being in response to that instance. Post-modern ethics

foreground wisdom, which involves an active practice to decide what is best in a concrete situation. They engage with particularities and emotions rather than seeking the dispassionate application of general and abstract principles. They recognise the uncertainty, the messiness and provisionality of decision making. Implicit in this turn to active ethical practice is trust in the ethical capacities of individuals, their ability to make judgements rather than simply apply rules.

(Dahlberg and Moss, 2005:69)

These new understandings undermine the dominance of 'modernist constructs of professionalism' which have silenced the knowledge-base of ECEC, opening alternative ways of thinking about and seeing early years practitioners, ways which focus on trust, ability, and knowing, the capacity to make judgements rather than just to follow rules.

#### 4.4.2 Bernstein: Horizontal and Vertical Knowledge.

To frame her analysis of the knowledge base for ECEC, Campbell-Barr, draws on the work of Bernstein (1999;2000) who developed a sociology of knowledge to consider different knowledge structures and their validity. In his model, Bernstein identified horizontal and vertical discourses, with vertical knowledge (knowledge about something) equivalent to theory, so that vertical knowledge is seen as being coherent, explicit, structured with a specialised language. It is considered strong as it can speak to other knowledge, enabling it to be described and distributed, thus allowing it to be scrutinised and challenged, all of which contributes to legitimising this knowledge.

Horizontal knowledge describes everyday knowledge that is likely to be local, context dependent and tacit. In Bernstein's model, horizontal knowledge is segmented and unstructured which renders it difficult to distribute; the language used to describe it is embedded in the group or segment, resulting in the knowledge only being distributed locally and although there may be similarities between different groups or segments, the unstructured nature of horizontal knowledge means the similarities cannot be scrutinised. As it cannot easily be described and scrutinised, this means that it is often disregarded. Whilst some may assume, therefore, that vertical knowledge has more value and significance, as Campbell-Barr (2019) rightly argues,

propositional knowledge (“know-that”) is not sufficient because members of the ECEC workforce will need to “know-how” to apply and evaluate the knowledge.

(ibid: 135)

#### 4.4.3 Phronesis

Describing Aristotle’s three forms of knowledge—episteme (pure knowledge), techne (skills) and phronesis (practical wisdom), she further develops her argument to highlight how knowledge is not just theoretical (that which has been written about, distributed and validated) to explain that knowledge is also grounded in the everyday. However, Campbell-Barr does not see phronesis (practical knowing) as innate, but considers it to be learned knowledge,

reasoning that 'know-that' (episteme) and 'know-how' (techne) include the application of phronesis.

Phronesis is acquired through experience and is deliberative, but a lack of articulation of its deliberations does not mean it is absent.

(ibid: 138)

Campbell- Barr cites being caring, being loving, being empathetic as examples of learned knowledge, and how a phronesis forms a link between reason and emotions. She sees phronesis as "a key component in the recontextualisation and application of knowledges" to meet the needs of practice (ibid:142). However, rather than seeing practical knowledge as a separate learned approach that links reason and emotions, I draw upon the work of Heron (1996) who in his 'Extended Epistemology of Knowing' identifies 'Practical Knowing' as the highest form of knowing, with subjective inner 'Experiential Knowing' as the grounding for the other forms of knowing. This is illustrated in Figure 3 and further explained below.

#### 4.4.4 A Basket of Knowledges

Writing about her work in an on-line journal for Early Years professionals, Campbell-Barr (2017) explains how she visualises the idea of a large 'basket of knowledges' which everyone working in ECEC has in their minds, that can be rummaged through to know how to work with children. This provides a useful visual metaphor, perhaps of a woven object comprising many strands, illustrating the idea that ECEC professionals possess multiple forms of knowledge which they can draw upon and that the relationship between the different forms of knowledge is:

often subtle, not differentiated and binary. ECEC therefore requires a combination of knowledges, both vertical (with varying structures and grammars) and horizontal, that combine in subtle ways so that individuals "know-how" to meet the demands of professional practice.

(Campbell-Barr 2019:135)

The metaphor of a basket, whilst demonstrating the complex nature of the different types of knowledges practitioners need to draw upon, can also be viewed in another way- as an object, external to the person, thus reinforcing the idea that knowledge is separate from the knower. It

suggests that knowledge needs to be categorised and legitimised in order to be of value. This reveals a tension as to whether horizontal knowledge is considered legitimate, with Campbell-Barr believing and expressly pointing out, that the problem lies in the weak articulation of experiential knowledge and that of seeing practical wisdom as innate. This "renders them invisible in modernist constructs of professionalism that seek knowable features" so that experiential knowledge is de-valued and "silenced from conceptualisations of an ECEC knowledge-base " (Campbell-Barr 2018: 81). Her hope is that because knowledge is social and given legitimisation through a "common body of knowledge that binds people together" (ibid 84) it is this which will eventually "permit the legitimisation" of subjective characteristics such as dispositions, attitudes and beliefs (experiential knowledge) as a form of knowledge for ECEC.

The social origins of attitudes, dispositions and beliefs provide potential for their legitimisation as a form of knowledge, but they require greater articulation to enable their identification and evaluation.

(ibid)

This is a contentious arena because knowledge and power are inextricably linked in a symbiotic relationship and what knowledge is deemed legitimate or true knowledge is a "function of power and the knowledges it favours and legitimises" (Moss, 2019:39). It seems therefore, that some knowledges require more than just greater articulation to move from being illegitimate to being seen as legitimate. All knowledge is value and interest-laden (Thayer-Bacon, 2003) and how that knowledge is named and categorised, as well as which narratives gain currency and are favoured by those that hold power, is political (Marshall 1999).

knowledge can never be free from ideology, because all knowledge is biased, incomplete and linked to the interests of specific groups.

(MacNaughton, 2005:22)

The underlying and inherent problem is that whilst vertical knowledge can be scrutinized and legitimised by observable empirical evidence, it is more problematical, because of its implicit and tacit nature, to produce empirical and testable evidence to support subjective claims to knowledge (horizontal knowledge).

This has political implications because the methods for testing objective claims to knowledge are held by most research communities as the only legitimate forms, so until recently these forms have been applied to subjective claims to knowledge.  
(Whitehead and McNiff, 2006: 33)

As discussed in the previous chapter, which drew upon Habermas's (1987) criteria of social validity, different kinds of evidence and different kinds of validation processes need to be used in claims to subjective knowledge. It becomes then a question of who decides what is deemed to be "true" and valid, and whose voices are thereby silenced by such a stance.

#### 4.4.5 Knowledge as Knowing

Also worthy of consideration is that knowledge is not static. The social character of knowledge highlights its fluidity and changing nature as everyone builds upon their prior knowledge and continues to develop it through experiences. I believe it to be much more useful to describe knowledge as knowing- as a verb; 'knowing' helps remind us about the transactional nature of the relationship between knowers and the known (Dewey 1938; 1978.) Dewey's theory of knowing is not based on a dualism between the inner subjective mind and the objective world 'out there', but rather knowing is understood as a way of doing things, one which focuses on the relationship between our actions and their consequences and is the central idea of Dewey's transactional theory of knowing (Biesta 2004). 'Knowing' emphasises that this is an active process in which we are all engaged. Furthermore, not only are all people social beings, but we are also contextual social beings and as Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2013: 23) explain:

Social construction is a social process, and in no way existent apart from our own involvement in the world- the world is always *our* world, understood and constructed by ourselves, not in isolation but as part of a community of human agents, and through our active interaction and participation with other people in that community.

The recognition that 'tacit knowing' (Polyani, 1958) and 'embodied knowledge' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Whitehead and McNiff, 2006) are also valuable forms of knowledge is crucial. Just because something cannot be scientifically proven and 'validated', does not mean that it does not exist and is not significant (Young and Muller, 2007) and often:

The practical theories of practitioners are the most powerful and appropriate forms for dealing with contemporary social issues; and these are located in and generated from everyday practices, inspired by tacit forms of knowledge as much as by cognitive forms.  
(McNiff, 2013: 4)

Furthermore, human knowing is not only cognitive but is captured through our experiences as feeling, sensory and emotional beings who possess a vast store of tacit knowledge within (Polyani, 1958). Comprehending knowledge in this way opens up so many more possibilities for shared learning and understanding. Examples of this can be found in \*\* Chapter Five and \*\*Chapter Seven, which describe the different phases of the Action research, demonstrating how

... human knowing is not simply intellectual but is materially grounded in our experience of the world and expressed in the practice of our lives.

(Reason, 1998:12)

## 4.6 Embodied Knowledge

As will be seen in \*\* Chapter Five, which describes the Collaborative Inquiry, embodied knowledge was recognised, valued and built upon as an important form of knowledge (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). The idea of embodied knowledge is originally derived from the writings of Merleau-Ponty who in 'The Phenomenology of Perception' (1945/2012) offers a conceptual insight into bodily knowing. Embodied knowledge has much in common with tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1966) in that it is a type of knowledge that cannot be explicitly explained or verbalised. Polanyi showed various instances of this by asserting that “we can know more than we can tell” stating that “our body is the ultimate instrument of all our external knowledge, whether intellectual or practical” (Polanyi, 1966:15). Strongly opposing the Cartesian mind–body dualism dating back to Socrates and Plato, Merleau-Ponty disagreed that human beings consist of a material physical body and a non-material mental mind. Instead, he argued that humans experience themselves through their bodies and engage in various projects in relation to the environment in which they find themselves (Hamington, 2004). In ascribing value to the body, Merleau-Ponty does not marginalise the mind but reconceptualises it as inextricably intertwined with the body; we perceive and access the world through our bodies; accordingly,

all knowledge is embodied knowledge as we can never be free from embodiment.

When beginning the Collaborative Inquiry, in common with most of the group, I had never heard 'embodied knowledge' being described before. But as the CI progressed, and we discussed and shared our stories we began to recognise and understand the significance of embodied knowledge to our understanding of ourselves and our actions in the world, and this contributed to a growth in confidence within the group. Initially, the majority of the practitioners' accounts communicated a lack of confidence, most frequently being because of earlier childhood experiences, with a common feeling that many of them believed that they did not do anything special, that they just 'did their job'.

*I started my senior school as an under-achiever, believing there wasn't a brain cell in my head...It came to my O levels which I failed miserably. I felt so shameful and a failure... We go to work, and we just do it, we attend to those around us and do our best to care and nurture. This [referring to the description of her sense of failure at school] is what made it hard for me to recognise what we did in the workplace, how we made a difference, 'it's just what we did' I kept hearing myself say.*

**Written reflection: Donna (Practitioner setting H)**

However, as our shared inquiries developed, with each member of the group learning to pay attention to and reflect on their practice, and articulating their personal 'subjective' knowing, their new understanding about embodied knowledge and many ways of knowing, contributed to transforming how the practitioners saw themselves and began to impact on their actions in the world and on their practice.

According to Reason (1998), the purpose of human inquiry is:

the enhancement of human flourishing, the flourishing of persons as self-directing and sense-making agents located in democratic communities and organisations.

(Reason, 1998: 1)

During the Collaborative Inquiry, there was a shared recognition of this as Katie, a setting manager explains:



*At the core of the Collaborative Inquiry is that we are all unique practitioners in unique circumstances and there is no one thing we need to learn to enable us to provide a better service for children...The formation of the Inquiry meant we could identify our own areas for development and work through these at our own pace. The group provided a supportive structure to identify what really mattered to us. The significance was the process of learning, without even knowing sometimes what the end product would be. We have no doubt whatsoever that this particular process enabled us to develop our understanding of what makes us unique practitioners, and that placing value on our own significance has changed the way we approach our role. There is no training course, prescription or magic word that can do that for us, we had to go through the Collaborative Inquiry. As a result, we have no doubt that our practice has improved. We have a greater understanding of ourselves and worth and therefore able to support children appropriately...we have a new approach to evaluating and improving practice, we are more confident in our actions and therefore better role models for the children, and we are able to understand the issues facing practitioners to a far greater extent.*

**Feedback Account: Katie (Manager setting S)**

In the CI relational forms of knowing and coming to know were valued, enhancing 'human flourishing' at individual and group level. Thayer-Bacon (2010) describes a 'relational epistemology' and explains how knowing is a process of becoming and that:

we be-come knowers and are able to contribute to the constructing of knowledge due to the relationships we have with others. None of us are able to make contributions without the help of others, and none of us discover new ideas all on our own.....it [a relational epistemology] views knowing as something that is socially constructed by embedded, embodied people who are in relation with each other.

(Thayer-Bacon, 2010:2-3)

During the Collaborative Inquiry, each person had to find their own way, a way to recognise their own unique gifts and talents in order "to flourish", but this was done in collaboration with others, which Katie in the above account, identified as a "supportive structure". The ethical implications of this are discussed earlier in \*\*3.9 Research as Ethical Practice.

*The Collaborative Inquiry has been an emotional journey for all the right reasons. It began by being asked to think about what mattered to each of us and what drove us. It certainly made me stop and think. I began to look at what motivated me and why I was passionate about certain things. I started to question my values and consider the reasons behind my motives. I asked myself why I felt a strong need, in my role as manager, to look after everybody in my charge. Why it was so important that I was there to support and nurture adults and children alike and see them grow in confidence and success. I remember feeling suddenly tearful as the realisation hit me that I had been deprived of motherhood and how much it had meant to me even though I had suppressed those thoughts for many years.*

**Feedback account: Joanne (Manager Setting K)**

Within traditional epistemologies,

emotions are perceived as disruptive and subversive of knowledge as a wild zone  
unamendable to reason and its scientific apparatus of investigation and control.  
(Stanley and Wise, 2002: 193)

In the CI, the inner world of feeling and emotions was recognised, acknowledged and accepted as part of the research process; feeling and emotion were seen as legitimate forms of knowledge which counted as much as cognition and rationality. Ignoring the significant role emotions have to play in research into the social world, is flawed because it hinders the examination of assumptions and processes at inter and intra levels of inquiry (McLaughlin 2003). By embracing “the full range of human sensibilities as an instrument of research” (Heron 1996:7) Collaborative Inquiry utilises John Heron’s (1996) extended epistemology of fourfold knowing.

## 4.6 Heron's Extended Epistemology of Knowledge.

Heron describes his model of knowing as a radical epistemology, a “theory of how we know which is *extended* beyond the ways of knowing of positivist oriented academia.” (Heron and Reason 2005:1), which they conceive as being primarily based on “abstract propositional

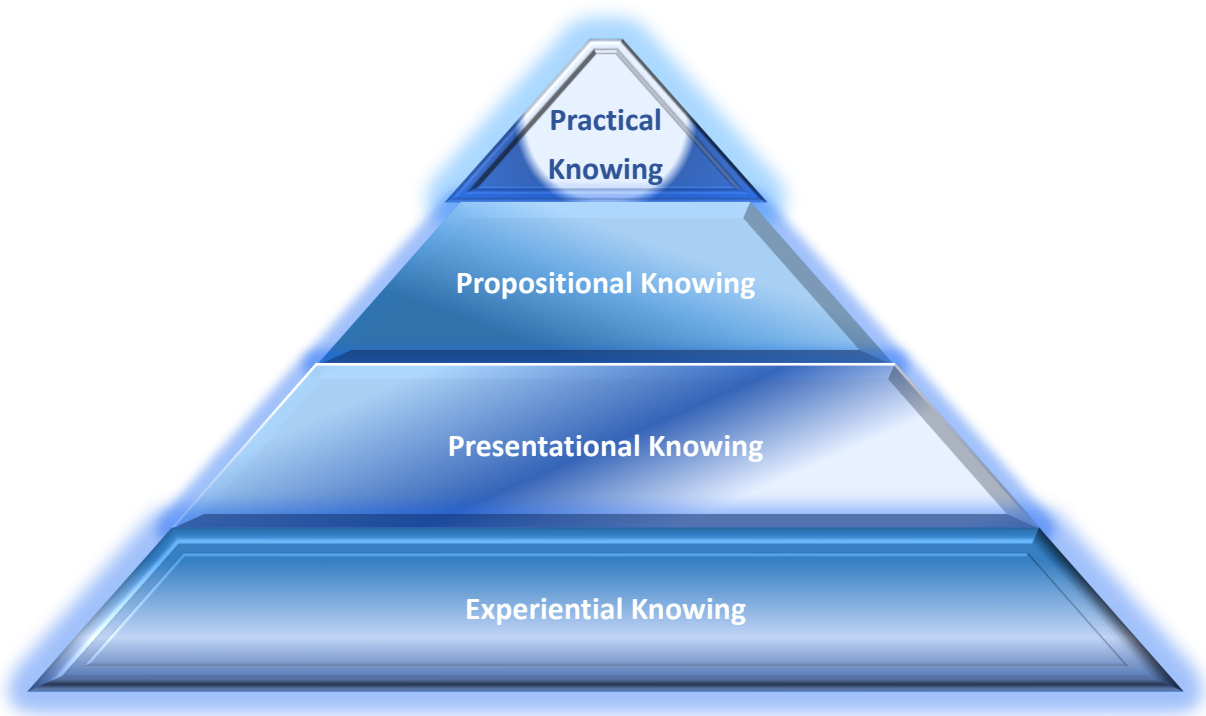
knowledge and a narrow empiricism.” Heron (1996), identifies four forms of knowing, each influencing the other:

**1: Practical Knowing** is the highest form of knowing, built on the foundations of the other three. Practical Knowing is the ability to change things through action (how to do something).

**2: Propositional Knowing** is the knowledge expressed in the forms of formal language (knowing about something).

**3: Presentational Knowing** emerges from and is grounded on experiential knowing. It is concerned with creative, expressive forms such as drama, stories, poetry, music (knowing as expression)

4: At the base of the pyramid sits **Experiential Knowing** which is knowing through direct face-to face encounter. It is knowing through empathy, attunement and resonance with another, the knower feeling both attuned and distinct from the other.



*Figure 3 Heron's Pyramid of Fourfold Knowing (1996)*

In collaborative inquiry there is connection and harmony among the four types of knowing. This contrasts with traditional ideas of the validity of knowledge which focus on the way propositional constructs are measured (Bray et al, 2009). Everyone naturally employs these four ways of knowing and tacitly interweaves them in all sorts of ways in everyday life. Heron's model deepened my understanding, giving me an expanded view of what was possible, enabling me to see with 'new eyes'. Traditionally, knowledge had been privileged to that which concerned 'propositional knowing'- this was the type of knowledge which was legitimate and 'counted'. Propositional knowing is knowing 'about' something in intellectual terms of ideas and theories and is the form of knowledge given most value in our society. In Heron's model, experiential knowing is the grounding for the other forms of knowing, articulating reality through inner resonance with what there is, it is knowing through empathy, attunement and resonance with one another. In the CI all four ways of knowing were utilised with intention, in a "virtuous cycle"

....skilled action leads into enriched encounter, thence into wider imaginal portrayal of the pattern of events, thence into more comprehensive conceptual models, thence into more developed practice, and so on.

(Heron & Reason, 2008:3)

By working individually and then sharing our practitioner led inquiries in collaboration with others, practitioner knowing is valued, and understanding deepened when these 4 ways of knowing merge - grounded in our experiences, expressed in our stories and understood as articulation of values based pedagogy. In collaborative action research, knowledge is developed through relationships with others as communal acts of knowing and learning, in a continuous cycle of discussion, reflection and consensus over what has been said and what it means. Relational knowing is central to this and stands in opposition to the patterns of impersonal knowing- separation, categorisation, objectivity, and rationalisation (Ledwith & Springett, 2010; Heshusius, 1994).

## 4.7 Practitioners as Creators of Knowledge

Drawing upon subjective, inner knowing is of particular significance in knowledge creation.

.... all human beings bring to the process of learning personal schemas that have been formed by prior experiences, beliefs, values, socio-cultural histories and perceptions. When new experiences are encountered and mediated by reflection, inquiry and social interaction, meaning and knowledge are constructed.

(Lambert, 2003: 19)

In the CI each practitioner was a co-researcher and by individually researching an aspect of our own practice and sharing findings within the collaborative context, the practical, situational knowing of the practitioners was foregrounded and the complexities of practice acknowledged; this enabled a shared sense of working together to improve the experience of children and families to develop. The meetings provided an opportunity for the practitioners to learn with and from each other and opened up possibilities for improved practice and new ways of working. This provided the means for

each person to create knowledge about their theories of the world, and their action in the world, where they can give an evidenced account of the nature of the dynamic relationship between the two and how each mutually informs the other.

(Walton, 2011: 8)

Leading their own inquiries enabled the practitioners to become not just receivers of knowledge but knowledge-creators, developing and articulating their own personal theories of practice. This concept is one that is linked to, but different from, using theory to explain practice and relates to the acknowledgement of practical knowing as the primary form of knowing (Heron 1996).

It presupposes a conceptual grasp of principles and standards of practice, presentational elegance and experiential grounding in the situation within which the action occurs. It fulfils the three prior forms of knowing, bringing them into fruition with purposive deeds, and consummates them with an autonomous celebration of excellent accomplishment.

(Heron & Reason, 1997:281)

An example to support this is found in chapter 7: \*\*\*' Difficult Conversations- role play scenario' in which a practitioner developed to describe an imagined encounter with a parent of a child with SEND (special educational needs and disability). The drama sequence she created is a powerful example of "practical knowing" and demonstrates how all 4 types of knowing came together to create "useful knowledge" (McNiff 2013:7) in a living and organic way.

I acknowledge that this is not the traditional way of positioning practitioners, aware that

Who researches and how; whose experience is researched and how that is named or categorised; what discourses gain currency and hold power; what forms of inquiry and writing are favoured by mainstream powerholders, and much more are political issues. "Creating knowledge" is political business. Living practice is thus politicised.

(Marshall, 1999:158)

In this chapter, I examined the nature of knowledge and coming to know, focusing on the nature of professional knowledge in ECEC to explore the rich and varied forms of knowledge early years practitioners draw upon in their work with young children. Verity Campbell Barr's concept of 'A Basket of Knowledges' was used to frame my analysis. I showed how, by adopting a relational epistemology, different forms of knowing and coming to know were valued in the inquiry. Heron's extended epistemology of knowledge, to embrace four ways of knowing (Heron, 1996) was introduced. Finally, I demonstrated how utilising subjective, inner knowing is of particular significance in knowledge creation.

The following chapter describes the first phase of the research, explaining how the project was instigated, giving reasons why the Collaborative Inquiry was chosen as a way to offer an alternative approach to 'training'. I describe how through the process of the inquiry, by individually and collectively researching our practice, practitioners began to have the confidence to participate and feel valued, seeing new perspectives and opening up new understandings. Using examples from the practitioners' accounts, I demonstrate how motivated and inspired we all were by this new way of working.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Action research phase 1:**

### **The Collaborative Inquiry**

“Having someone outside our tiny nursery community who is interested in who we are and what we are doing is a massive boost. Knowing that others are interested because of a shared passion for the well-being of children rather than because of a tick box, raises our confidence in what we are doing. Finally, someone cares and what I do matters.”

Caroline (Manager Setting L)

This chapter explains the first phase of the action research including how it was initiated. It shows how I explored the ways I could use my educational influence to work in collaboration with others, with the shared aim being to provide a rich and nurturing learning experience for young children from birth to 5 years old. I describe my engagement in a 'Collaborative Inquiry' as I researched my practice with Early Years Practitioners from 11 PVI Nurseries. It demonstrates the significance of working with others in relational and participative ways, and how issues of power and positioning were confronted in order to explore what needs to happen to make an experiential difference to the improved wellbeing and flourishing of young children; it also reveals how this process enabled the practitioners to recognise and value their 'embodied knowledge', with them coming to understand how they make a difference to the experience of the children and families with whom they work.

## 5.1 Background Context to the CI

The first phase of my research began in October 2010 when I approached Dr. Joan Walton at Hope University to help me develop an action research project, which resulted in the Collaborative Inquiry (CI) being established. It is important to understand how different taking this approach was at the time, and why for me it offered an exciting challenge which I hoped would engage and involve the practitioners from the PVI sector in learning in a way they had not had the opportunity to experience before.

At this time, I was the lead officer for the team of Area Special Educational Need Co-ordinators (SENCOs). Initially this was a team of ten, including four of my colleagues who, like me, were also EYFS Consultants. I was Chair of the 'SEND Task Group' which commissioned SEND training for ECEC settings. Each Area SENCO was responsible for providing support to 12 PVI Nurseries which we regularly visited and provided Area SENCO support to. During these visits we became aware of how isolated many SENCOs felt, some taking on this role with little or no training and with limited opportunities to meet with more experienced SENCOs. Consequently, I established a network of 'cluster meetings' for groups of early years SENCOs across the city. These offered the chance for networking as well as providing a focus for continuing professional development



(CPD) in a smaller group situation. The practitioners found this less daunting than full day 'conference style' training events which, at the time, had been the preferred option. For many years there had been a plethora of new initiatives, mainly from National Strategies, so people were used to attending training. However, it was certainly the case that training about 'SEND' and training about the EYFS were seen as distinct. This was reflected in the funding streams available; EYFS funding was seen as 'education' and came from the school's budget line, and Early Years SEND funding came through children's services and the 'childcare' budget. Our team was allocated funding from both budgeting streams which for some strategic officers in the LA, were often considered separate and different. This sometimes proved challenging as we firmly believed in the inclusive approach of the EYFS and that good EYFS provision was good SEND provision (Mathieson, 2015)

#### 5.1.1 Aiming High for Disabled Children.

My concern was that despite the increase in the numbers attending training, settings often struggled to identify and provide the correct support for children with SEND and relied heavily on their Area SENCO, lacking the confidence to independently implement the 'early intervention' strategies that were necessary. This concern was reflected within the LA and at a national level; namely, that despite investment in training for those working in ECEC, evidence suggested this was not achieving the change required to support improved outcomes for children. At LA level, although we could show an increase in numbers attending training events from ECEC, we knew that this did not always translate to an improvement in practice. It was therefore recognized that there was a need to find new ways of working.

'Aiming High for Disabled Children' (AHDC) was a national initiative with the aim of improving service provision within universal services for children with SEND and their families (DCSF 2008). This programme had funding for new and innovative approaches, and I put together a successful proposal for a new way of working with practitioners in ECEC through using action

research. The project had inclusion at its heart, so was about developing provision for **all** children, not just targeting the approach for children with SEND (Miles and Singal 2010). The aim for establishing the Collaborative Inquiry was to offer an alternative approach to ‘training’ and through practitioner research, enable practitioners to be open to learning the skills and understandings they needed to improve their practice. I hoped it would give them the opportunity to have the confidence to participate and feel valued. Over the course of the CI my understanding of the significance of practitioners valuing themselves deepened, as the practitioners’ realisation grew about their value in the lives of children. As Walton explains:

this added greatly to their feelings of self-confidence. Many of their initial accounts communicated a lack of confidence, rooted in either childhood experiences, or being encouraged to enter a job that did not have high social status..... At the outset, many of them claimed they did not do anything special- they just ‘did their job’. However, after meeting for six months as a group and learning to pay attention to and reflect on their practice, they began to be aware of the significance of their role.

(Walton, 2011: 307)

### 5.1.2 Instigating the Project

At this time, Dr. Joan Walton was the Director of the ‘Centre for Child and Family’ at Liverpool Hope University with a particular interest in action research. Even from our initial discussions, I could see that we shared an understanding of the importance of recognising the skills, knowledge, experience and competence of practitioners, their “embodied knowledge” (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006). I was excited by the prospect of working with the University. I felt that it gave the project a certain ‘legitimacy’ that other training and projects I had been involved with, did not have. I was also aware that for many of the participants, being involved in a project with a University would be something that they had never had the chance to experience before.

However, it also felt risky, I was being entrusted by the LA to do something that was new and innovative but that brought with it a pressure. It had to work, and by the end I would have to ‘evidence’ that ‘improved outcomes for children’ had been achieved. I had several meetings with Dr. Walton, and we discussed this challenge. We both recognised that the nature of action

research was such that outcomes could not be predicted in the way that the LA were asking. Action research was about opening up ‘potentials and possibilities’ that would result in learning and change, but what these would be, would only unfold as part of the process of the research.

Drawing from the understandings gained from the first action research project I had undertaken for my MA, my aim was to ensure that by engaging in practitioner action research, the group participants were able to explore *questions that mattered to them*, and hence open possibilities for answers that held real meaning for those involved. This piece of work had at its heart a social vision for change, not just organisational change (Foster, 1989) and as such, it was imbued with ‘personal and social intent’, concurring with McNiff (2013) who states:

..... it is my firm belief that research does not exist of and for itself but should bring useful knowledge into the world of everyday personal and social practices, and should help us all find ways of living more peaceful and productive lives.

(ibid: 7)

This was a key motivator for me instigating the research, searching for “useful knowledge” and exploring ways to improve my practice to engage and involve the practitioners, and for them to find empowerment through this process (Freire, 1970/1993). The research was not *about* the practitioners and their work, but was about researching *with them*, so my focus was to inquire into how I could work differently with them to explore ways that provision and practice might be developed that made a positive difference for the children who were at the heart of these intentions. My earlier experience of action research helped me to recognise that when we work with others, each of us are learners engaged in a process of finding out about ourselves, our practice and our place in the world; that we are all learners who are able to learn with and from each other, acknowledging learning as being “the means by which people come to perceive, interpret, criticise and transform the worlds in which they live.” (Mezirow, 1983: 128).

In meeting Dr. Walton (who I will refer to from now on as Joan because dispensing with formality of titles more accurately reflects the nature of our relationship as it developed and deepened), I had found someone who understood my attraction to participatory research

methodologies and although we were coming from different contexts, and offered different understandings, I was confident that we would be able to work in partnership with one another in developing this project. Yet, I was also aware of how little I knew about research methods and was naïve to think that establishing an action research project would be straightforward. It involved many shared discussions about the nature and purpose of the project, involving exploration of ontological and epistemological questions (although I did not name them as such at the time). Our starting point was that the approach to the research should be a collaborative one. Even this decision seemed a radical one, as it was such a contrast to the approaches to ‘training’ with which the practitioners and I were familiar.

## 5.2 Collaborative Inquiry I><We

Joan explained her reasons for seeing the way forward as being the establishment of a “Collaborative Inquiry”. I had never heard of such a thing before but had some awareness of John Heron’s *Co-operative Inquiry. Research into the Human Condition* (Heron, 1996). This is a specific approach to action research, and is “a form of participative, person-centred inquiry which does research *with* people not *on* them or *about* them.” (Heron 1996:19). This was important to me as I did not wish to re-assert hierarchical power structures which conflicted with my theory of practice and hope as a researcher, to work alongside and with practitioners, together engaging in critical reflection as a means to facilitate change (Reason, 1998). Bray et al (2000) define collaborative inquiry as

... a process consisting of repeated episodes of reflection and action through which a group of peers strives to answer a question of importance to them.

(ibid 2000:6)

Heron describes particular decisions and processes that need to be undertaken for ‘Full Form Co-operative Inquiry’ to take place, but in proposing “Collaborative Inquiry” Joan explained we would not be strictly adhering to Heron’s approach, but the CI would be greatly influenced by it, and would adopt the participatory principles on which Heron’s methodology was based. Arrangements were subsequently made to invite managers and practitioners from ECEC to take part in a ‘Collaborative Inquiry’ that focused on the question ‘How do we, individually and

collaboratively, integrate research and practice to improve the wellbeing of children?’.

My work and research were closely linked, and at certain times during the project it was as if they could have been interchangeable terms. However, there was a boundary here, this was a research project; I was researching my own practice involving action and reflection as I went about my work. In my work with the practitioners, I needed to reflect deeply, not just on *what* I did but also on *how* I did it, paying attention to my inner thoughts and feelings.

After the top-down approaches to CPD with which I was familiar, working collaboratively with Joan to plan the project seemed like a breath of fresh air. It did not matter that Joan was not an expert in SEND or early years, but that we both believed in the ‘potentials and possibilities’ that would be opened by using action research. I was able to explain the implications of the understandings I had gained from doing my first research project at Pen Green and why I was so passionate about working with Early Years Practitioners. Joan introduced me to Dr. Jack Whitehead who was working at Liverpool Hope as a visiting Professor. He was very interested in our plans to set up a new project and was happy to support us with it. He shared his ideas about living theory action research, which are detailed in ‘*Action Research, Living Theory*’ (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006), a text which I have read several times since then, and which influenced what I went on to do as my inquiry developed. Living theory is an approach to action research which focuses on inquiries that begin with and are developed from the ontological values and understanding of the practitioner-researcher who is then encouraged to develop their own ‘living theory’ as a means of reflecting on how they could live their values more fully in practice. This approach was evident in the CI, which used values as a basis for reflection.

### 5.2.1 Taking a Risk- Instigating a new way of working.

I recall returning back to the office full of enthusiasm and excitement about developing the action research project. At our team meeting when I explained the outline plan, the reaction was mixed. It was the first time that a large project was being targeted solely at those from PVI nurseries and there was some scepticism about how well things would turn out. Previously the

‘good case studies’ came from schools and maintained nurseries. I explained my reasoning to the team, that the project should not just be targeted solely at SENCOs but the invitation to participate would be extended to Managers and Key Persons. The termly review meeting with my line manager Paula, focused on the need to demonstrate impact on outcomes for children, and stressed the importance of setting measurable targets before the project had started. This was accepted practice when starting any project. We had all been involved in leading projects before, and the LA had begun to use the term ‘action research’ for such work. Yet there was little understanding of the methodology, which should involve research cycles of action and reflection emerging from the practice itself. It was not enough for the project members to attend a training event, then try out someone else’s idea or suggestions and then report what had happened. Neither should the focus be on providing evidence for how pre-determined targets had been met (whilst also omitting to acknowledge the things that did not go so well).

I explained my understanding of action research and how the approach taken would be process-based. I stressed that whilst I had no doubt that improved outcomes would be evidenced by the end of the project, I was not yet able to say exactly what they would be, but that this was something that would emerge as part of the process. It was an uncomfortable feeling and I felt under pressure to get results and to prove to my manager, and to the LA, that taking this ‘risk’ would be worth it.

The next step was to send out the invitation for others to join us in the research project, inviting them to attend an initial meeting and from that decide whether they would like to join the group when it started at Hope University. There was quite a lot of interest and excitement that this would be taking place in a University, which gave it some extra appeal. This was where the new way of working started!

43 people attended this meeting and right from the start, it felt very different. It was more informal than other events, with people asked to talk to one another about themselves and what they thought was important. There was an energetic buzz and after the usual

introductions we explained more about this being a research project, not training. The session gave the opportunity to talk, reflect and share. It all felt very open ended, and I was worried that people would think it was all a waste of their time. This was quite different from what usually happened, there were no handouts, no glossy booklets. But at the end, several people came up to express their interest and find out more details about how it would work. I must admit that I did feel some disappointment that only 11 settings committed to take part in the project. This meant that the manager and one practitioner would be attending a monthly meeting over a period of 9 months, but on reflection, having a group of up to 22 was ideal. One manager recalled that first meeting and what it meant to her:

*Right from the start I was 'hooked'. I was fascinated by what Jack [Whitehead] had to say. When each of us had to think about our practice and talk about something we were proud of, and I thought that this would be so easy. I had come along with 3 of the girls, and I am really proud of them and what they do in our nursery. All of them, they are so good with the children, but even although we were just chatting between ourselves, not one of them could say what they thought was good about themselves and what they did. They couldn't see it. This shocked me! I had to go round and remind them saying things like- what about all that you've been doing to settle Frankie and when you were telling his Mum and she was so chuffed? Each of them seemed surprised and embarrassed and that made me feel so guilty- had I not praised them enough? Was there something else I should be doing? I thought then that getting involved would be a good thing to do.*

**Feedback Account: Sarah (Manger Setting H)**

I did all the background organising in terms of raising the order and contacting the settings with details of times and venue etc., continuing to liaise with Joan and Jack and understand more about living theory and collaborative inquiry. When the group met for the first session, I was excited, but nervous too. I was conscious of not wanting to 'take over' and aware of the difference between facilitating the process or directing it to go in the way I wanted it to. I reflected on Heron's description of the process, that each of the participants would be co-subject and co-researcher. But I struggled to see how this could be when everyone, including me, held Dr Joan Walton and Professor Jack Whitehead in such awe - they were highly

knowledgeable academics who worked in the University. Joan's response was that I should remain open and "trust the process" (a key phrase that has been used numerous times since then). We worked together, discussing an outline plan for the session, but it felt strange to me that there was no power-point presentation to prepare, or handouts to take away. I wondered why I should feel a little uneasy about that; perhaps it was that having such resources provided me with a 'crutch'? It seemed that despite what I had previously said about my desire to move away from the 'expert model', I was finding that this was not such an easy transition to make. I did however understand about the power of dialogue and the significance of creating, and being part of, a learning community. And so, the aim of the first session was to begin to establish mutual trust and together to co-construct a learning contract, discussing issues of responsibility, confidentiality and trust eventually co-constructing a 'Learning Contract'.

At the session, I introduced Joan who explained her background and her observation that research and policymaking were not informed by the experience and skills of practitioners working directly with children. We started to discuss our experiences of the gap between policies and practice and how frustrating that was. From this discussion, the opportunity quite naturally arose to explain that the purpose of the inquiry was to research what could be done to redress that situation. It was the hope that the collaborative inquiry would provide a context in which each person would be respected, together engaging in a reflective process by sharing our 'research stories' with one another, with people drawing upon their own experiences, their own wisdom and 'inner knowing'. This was interesting stuff! Just like the other participants, I was learning about the significance of "embodied knowledge" for the first time. Looking back on the project, I see that this marked the start of each of us becoming co-subjects, and although it took some time for people to recognise, we were also becoming co-researchers, as we started to share our stories and learn from one another.

The thing that provided the impetus for most discussion, was when Joan started to discuss how most people wanted to make a difference in the world, but that because of a dominant culture that prioritised mechanistic ways of managing organisations, less value was given to those at



the bottom of the hierarchy than to those at the top. Everyone could relate to that and began talking about their experiences of the reality of how they were seen by most people and of the low status accorded to them because they worked with very young children. This was something that definitely connected with everyone in the group. But there was also a shared and passionate conviction that working with young children is a very important job, and a job they loved. They were making a difference, even if it wasn't always recognised. Joan was assuming the role of animateur (Freire 1973), which in Freire's terms, moves beyond being a passive facilitator; an animateur is more active, prompting dialogue amongst the group as well as critical thinking, so that what had taken on a cloak of invisibility, was being made visible.

Knowledge about the knowledge being presented and a critical approach to the claims being made, enables us to be aware and potentially seek liberation from the structures that structure who we are and what we can and cannot do. Those who engage in educational practice are made powerful and powerless by the theories and theorising that is or is not revealed.

(Gunter, 2001:75)

The wisdom contained in Helen Gunter's words, resonates deeply with me. The feeling of powerlessness need not be a fixed state. Liberation can be achieved through greater awareness and understanding of the existing power structures and systems within which we are located. With understanding comes the ability to choose whether to conform or resist, and the potential to use the influence we have in ways that align more closely to our values and beliefs. Opening up the possibilities of developing different ways of being and acting in the world, became more apparent as the inquiry progressed, this is discussed more fully in

**\*\* Chapter Six.**

To end the session, we had agreed to share a short video clip which was a palindrome of the poem 'Lost Generation' <https://youtu.be/42E2fAWM6rA> . This was used as a provocation, to think about the way we see the world and how a different perspective can create a different reality. The clip really is thought provoking and people wanted to know the link so that they could have a look at it again. The session had gone so well. It had been enjoyable, time had passed quickly, everyone seemed involved and interested and it didn't feel like 'work' at all. But

what had happened? What had we done? Was this research?

### 5.2.2 Trust the Process.....

Although I understood that the research process was cyclical, consisting of certain stages, it was still difficult to let go and to 'trust the process'. I had to think deeply about my role and be aware of my position as Quality Improvement Officer (QIO); letting go of the power and control that this position gave me, holding the intention clear in mind, to work in collaboration with the group. I had to stop wanting the inquiry to go in a certain way, by resisting my desire to make suggestions of lines of inquiry (that I thought may prove fruitful) and the practitioners 'may like' to follow up. To be collaborative, I had to fully recognise that this was a shared project, not mine alone. The significance of this is explained fully in chapter two- 2.4 Research as Relationship: The We' which describes 'participatory consciousness' (Heshusius, 1994) and the significance of this to ways of knowing and coming to know. Below is a summary of the cyclical stages of the Inquiry process that we followed:

## Summary of the Cyclical Stages of the Inquiry Process

### **Stage One:**

Sharing ideas as to what forms interest for individual enquiries, and why, exploring the values and experiences that have led them to think this is an area they could study. Emphasis on significance of them, not just their context but also the value of their experience and 'inner knowing'.

Sharing their own 'story' within the group and why this is the area they are interested in- as a result, each person (or group) determines the focus of their inquiry and an initial plan of action.

### **Stage Two:**

The first action phase, where the practitioners focus on their inquiry question, holding it in mind as they go about their day to day work. Noticing what happens and keeping notes if possible.

### **Stage Three:**

Second reflection phase, returning to the group and telling their stories of their experience and learning since the last meeting; listening to the stories of others and through dialogue, exploring the significance of their individual and shared experiences.

### **Stage Four:**

Second action planning stage informed by reflecting on practice and understandings gained and so on....

Stage One of the inquiry process, consisted of the sharing of ideas that the practitioners were interested in inquiring into, and why they were interested in doing so. This developed over several sessions, beginning with the idea of 'living theories'. There was much discussion about values, and everyone was invited to talk about how they came to be working where they were. The discussions began quietly, with the practitioners sharing their stories in twos and threes, listening to each other and talking about what they were passionate about in their work. As part of the group, I joined in with those discussions and began listening in a way I hadn't really done before, attentively and non-judgmentally, forgetting the 'agenda' that I had in my head.

I also felt vulnerable, a feeling that I noted in the following entry for a blog about Living Theory. In it, I acknowledged the crisis of confidence I was experiencing and how difficult I found it to articulate my beliefs and values in front of others and to feel truly comfortable with the fact

that as the one who initiated the project, I was not only co-researcher but co-subject too.

*At first, I found it hard to think about what my values were. I sensed I had them and believed they motivated me to do what I do, but I always thought of them as deep inside me and more connected to my feelings and emotions than my professional practice. I also realised that up until this point, no one in a work context had ever asked me what my values were before, and to write about them seemed, at the time, like an incredibly egotistical thing to do. I wanted to improve my work with the practitioners in order to make a difference for the children; but was it correct that the process was starting with me- my values and concerns?*

*I found writing about this a rather challenging thing to do for all sorts of reasons. In making my values explicit and reflecting on how they informed my practice, I was conscious of whether or not I was being honest- saying one thing and yet behaving in another way.*

**Blog entry- Living Values, improving practice co-operatively May 2011.**

As we progressed through the first action phase, holding our inquiry question in mind during our daily work, we returned to share our stories. This is when dialogue really started to develop. People became more confident and began talking about their experiences within the group itself. By the end of the session there was a profound sense of connection and affirmation. Not everyone was ready to contribute their story at this stage (not even me and it took me another 6 months to be ready to write my story and share it openly!) There was no pressure to do so and whilst some felt more confident to write, others preferred to capture their stories on video or find other ways to express their thinking such as by using drama and poetry.

### 5.2.3 “That was really good, wasn’t it? What was it again?”

Below is one manager’s reflections on being part of the CI and the impact the initial sessions had upon her. Her narrative account sums up the feeling that many of us had (including myself) at the beginning of the process:

*The session was valuable, interesting, and inspiring. We were asked to consider our values and I remember feeling a flicker of a light-bulb moment as I spoke to Elaine [deputy manager] about my personal experience and what I wanted for the children in my care...but by the time I got back to the nursery I turned and said to Elaine "That was really good wasn't it? What was it again?"*

**Feedback Account Caroline (Manager Setting L)**

Like Caroline, once I had left the session and returned to the office, I felt nervous and a little unsure. What had happened? How could I explain to the team how inspired and motivated I felt by working in such a relational way where the boundaries between us were softening and connection and trust were beginning to be established? It was so unlike the kind of feedback we would normally discuss after training events. I somehow felt 'wrong' to be feeling like this, I began to question myself- this was too emotional, not rational and I should see this for what it was- how could this be to do with 'improving outcomes for children'? I felt I needed to take back some control, to make sure things went correctly to ensure a tangible outcome at the end. Caroline was also experiencing a similar tension:

*Whilst I really enjoyed the sessions, and felt inspired and enlightened throughout, my need to know what the end product looked like took over all other thoughts. I wanted to fast forward and see what my learning should be so that I didn't make a fool of myself by getting it wrong.*

**Feedback Account. Caroline (Manager Setting L)**

It is easier to look back now, knowing how the process did unfold, seeing how trust developed, not just between one another, but trust in ourselves- our own thoughts, feelings and ideas. It was through this process that knowledge was created, and transformational changes did occur, but at the time it felt very risky. And I, like Caroline quoted above, also had a fear of 'getting it wrong'. Yet I was also drawn to and inspired by this way of working and from the fact that I was engaged in 'researching my own practice'. I gained strength (and courage) through my reading and came to understand that whilst Joan took the lead role in establishing the CI, it was not solely 'Joan's research project', or mine, or the practitioners, this was **our** research, with

everyone contributing individually and collectively to generate new knowledge and understanding. In this way, each of us were co-subjects and co-researchers, and Joan and I, as initial instigators of the project, co-facilitators. As such we were taking a particular epistemological stance, one which values relational forms of knowing and coming to know (Thayer-Bacon 2010). A 'relational epistemology' in which knowing is viewed as a process of becoming and is something that is socially constructed in relation with others:

we be- come knowers and are able to contribute to the constructing of knowledge due to the relationships we have with others. None of us are able to make contributions without the help of others, and none of us discover new ideas all on our own.

(Thayer-Bacon, 2010:2)

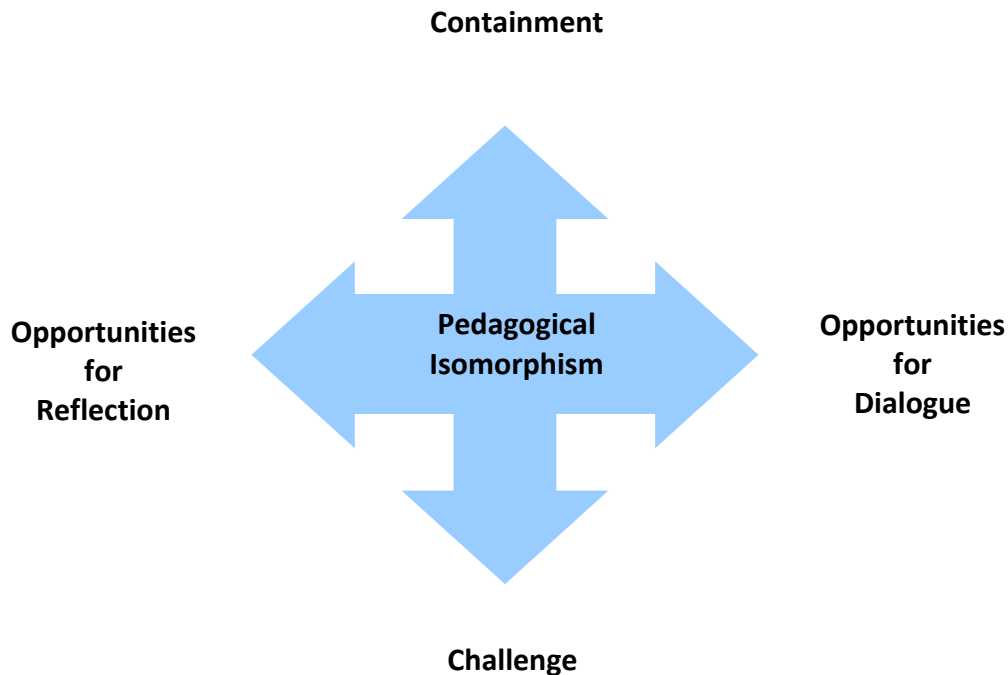
## 5.4 Generative Pedagogical Isomorphism

The CI was providing a context for mutual empowerment, a democratic inclusion, where the uniqueness of each practitioner and their contributions was trusted and valued. Through dialogue and reflection, everyone was accessing their own wisdom and embodied knowledge. It was experiential in nature and process based, demonstrating the theoretical concept of generative pedagogical isomorphism (Formosinho and Formosinho, 2007; Oliveira-Formosinho, and Formosinho, 2012). My understanding of this had been informed by my own lived experience of it being modelled by my tutors at Pen Green when undertaking my MA. I knew the transformational impact on my learning (and actions) which had resulted from my experience of this approach. Pedagogic isomorphism creates learning opportunities for educators that credits them with respect, agency and participation so that they can create similar opportunities for the children and families they work with (Whalley et al, 2007). During the sessions in the CI, I believe we also modelled this approach, offering emotional understanding in a safe place (containment); asking questions of each other to explore more deeply our understandings (challenge); doing so through a process of listening attentively and talking honestly and openly with each other (dialogue) and providing the time and space for critical thinking (reflection). Pedagogical isomorphism can be defined as:

the modelling of dialogue, reflection, celebration of differences, containment and challenge by tutors and mentors in their interaction with participants, an approach which participants then demonstrated in their roles as leaders.... in their direct work with staff. Staff would in turn mirror this way of working in their interactions with the children and families.

(ibid: 1)

This process is captured in the following diagram:



***Figure 4 Generative Pedagogical Isomorphism***

The process in the CI was a development of this model, because the learning that was emerging came from the questions that mattered to the practitioners themselves as they researched their practice; it was not part of a course which had to cover pre-determined learning outcomes as the MA did. However, I believe that it was through the creation of a such a supportive and enabling space that enabled the practitioners to recognise, articulate and develop their own theories of practice.

## 5.5 The Image of the Practitioner- working with strengths not deficits

From the beginning there was a shared understanding that our approach would acknowledge and value the strengths of the practitioners. The emphasis was on collaboration inherent in the inquiry process itself, which emerged from a participatory ontology.

This was so very different to the system and structures we were familiar with and part of. It required us to re-think and challenge those existing power structures. As Joan explained in her account, in working with the practitioners the aim was:

.....to discover ways in which the gaps between different roles and different levels of the hierarchy could be resolved, where boundaries would become more fluid, and where means could be found of resolving issues that made it difficult to improve the well-being of children. As they were the people working directly with children, they had a key role to play in creating the required knowledge.

(Walton, 2011: 303)

Understanding this, meant seeing how the practitioner role has been constructed; recognising and challenging the deficit narrative that exists was fundamental to the inquiry. I saw the link with the EYFS principle of the 'Unique Child' and at the beginning of the project wrote to Joan explaining how:

*The nurseries in Reggio Emilia started a whole new approach to nursery education by seeing the child in a different way "our image of the child is as a strong and powerful learner". This enabled a different relationship with the child to emerge, and new approaches to working with them to be developed. I think that our approach in the Collaborative Inquiry is based on a similar principle where 'our image of the practitioner' is as a powerful learner (not one that constructs them as 'only NNEBs' or whatever), and it is the practitioner who can make the most difference to a child's experience.*

**Email correspondence: December 2010**

I wondered how the practitioners themselves perceived their position and their power to influence change. Could I, by seeing each practitioner as a 'strong and powerful learner' enable a different relationship to emerge and new approaches to working with them to develop? This



was a key strand of the inquiry which was developed through shared discussion and reflection. The following transcript from one participant, echoed the feelings in much of the group:

*When I started this enquiry last year.... we talked about practitioners being the experts and having a wealth of knowledge and information. I had never looked at myself and my colleagues in this way before. Childcare workers have always been on the bottom rung of the ladder. We are not given the same respect, or anywhere near the same pay as teachers, for example, and yet we do a job that is equally important. I have 9 years' experience as a childcare practitioner and have NVQ qualifications – and yet I earn just 76p more [per hour] than my 22 year old son who is unqualified and works at McDonalds. When you work in a profession that is under-valued, you start to undervalue yourself.*

**Feedback Account Anita (SENCO)**

One of the main outcomes of the Collaborative Inquiry, which I believe developed out of the methodological approach taken, was a recognition by the group that practitioner knowing, their embodied knowledge was significant. By coming together to work in collaboration to explore shared themes, each of us were able to learn with and from each other and the practitioners were learning to value themselves and recognise that the potential and power to work effectively lies within. As a result, the practitioners individually and collectively, became more deeply aware of the significance of their relationship with the child and what happens in the present moment. As the inquiry developed, the phrase 'Every Moment Counts' held particular significance for the group.

## 5.6 'Every Moment Counts'

This phrase was a significant one for all of us in the CI. It had emerged as key learning through our discussions and reflections and became the title of the Conference that was put together by the participants at the end of the project to explain our learning. At that event, one member of the group explained to the audience what the CI had been about, highlighting the shift in

perception that had occurred with regards to a deepened understanding of the significance of the practitioner role amongst the practitioners themselves.

*Well of course as this approach is about the experience of the individual practitioner, so each person has responded in a different way, depending on where their starting point is. But through the collaborative inquiry we have realised that a HUGE issue in early years settings has been the lack of confidence of a large number of practitioners, often carried over from a lack of confidence as a child; but also, from the fact that they belong to a profession that is not valued by wider society, and hence they do not value themselves... It has taken a long time for a number of the group members to really believe that what they do is significant, and that they have anything of value to say to anyone outside their work setting. But now, each of those people recognises they are important, that they do have something to offer. And this in many cases has created a shift in how they see their work; they understand that they can be more proactive and influential in what they do.*

**Conference Script: Ada (Manager Setting D)**

This shift in perception did not come about because the practitioners were told think this way, it came from realisation, born out of providing time and a safe space for each person to reflect, discuss and articulate how they felt, their values, their fears and motivations and to recognise and trust their inner knowing.

*When we started to think about the importance of the moment by moment interactions we have with one another, I knew that that needed to be at the heart of what we do. If we didn't get it right, it could have lasting consequences [for the child]. We had proved this when we shared our stories.*

**Feedback account: Amy (Practitioner Setting H)**

By engaging in dialogue, and talking about personal experiences and feelings, some of which were painful to think about and share, meant that at times things got emotional and tears were spilled. I had not expected this, yet I knew this was significant- important. But I was also

conflicted and conscious of the 'real' world of my work- worried that I should be 'taking control', not letting people say too much, things that might embarrass them later. I could not fully explain why I felt conflicted like that at the time, only that a part of me worried whether what I was experiencing in collaboration with others, would really be considered as research? And how would this lead to improved ways of working and better outcomes for children? On the other hand, I also knew that during the sessions, we were experiencing not separation but a deeper connection with one another. It took me time to understand the experiential process of the CI and how it enabled each of us, in collaboration, to examine our lived experience, make sense of it and develop ways to shift that experience for the better. So that, as Heron indicated, research can and should, embrace "the full range of human sensibilities as an instrument of research" (Heron, 1996:7) and that:

It is a vision of persons in reciprocal relation using the full range of their sensibilities to inquire together into any aspect of the human condition with which the transparent body-mind can engage.

(ibid :1)

Heron's vision, and what we were experiencing as part of the CI, was so radically different to the ways of working and the examples of 'best practice' research from my world of school improvement, which are dominated by school effects research taking a scientific approach using input-process-output models. It has only been through my continued engagement with researching my own practice and questioning assumptions about research itself, that I began to become confident in questioning why educational research had to be carried out in this way.

In her research with early years practitioners, Julia Manning-Morton uses the feminist concept of 'the personal is political' to argue that professionalism in the early years has to be understood in terms of the detail of practitioners' relationships with children, parents and colleagues and that these relationships demand high levels of emotional knowledge, understanding and skill and that to be a truly effective early years practitioner requires a "reflexive interpretation" of those relationships

not only through the lens of our theoretical knowledge, but also through the mirror of our subjective personal histories and our present, feeling, embodied selves.  
(Manning-Morton, 2006:42)

This observation holds significance for the CI, as it highlights the relevance of personal histories, *emotional knowledge* and feelings in the present moment as being relevant to quality of practice. By utilising first and second person inquiry methods in the CI, I believe that the precision and detail of those relationships were revealed. Providing a way for us to be able to tell our stories and show how our practice with children enables them to learn; to share the successes and challenges of our work with parents and colleagues. It allows us to connect to our subjective personal histories and inner worlds that may remain hidden in other approaches to research. Furthermore, by articulating our theories of practice, they are made visible and can then be examined and reframed in some way. Within the CI, a dialogical and trusting space was created to enable this to happen.

The extract below provides an example of this and how the nature of the discussions within the CI about the dimensions of adult and child interactions, prompted a manager to make connections with her past and how she came to view herself, and how “these experiences and observations of life as a child moulded my soul.”

*I started to really think about how each moment forms the characters we become. An early and vivid memory I have is of walking home from the shops with my Mum, me having the very responsible job of carrying the eggs while Mum carried the potatoes. Her bag split and the potatoes spilled out into the road. I remember her, red faced with embarrassment at having to pick the potatoes out of the gutter. There was no conversation and I remember just standing watching ...but when I think back to that now, I feel a sense of responsibility and I suppose a bit of my Mum's shame.... the incident with the potatoes signifies to me the completely normal things that occur in life and how children can interpret these. Somehow, I blamed myself for the shame that my Mum felt, I thought I was responsible for her hardships and that guilt is now an everyday feeling for me.... I doubt my ability to know what is best for my children as I believe deep down that I have failed to do my duty to improve the lives of other people in the past in particular my Mum. Her expectations of me were so high and she always told me how much she loved me and was proud of me, but I believed I wasn't worthy of such love because I couldn't see how I made her life better. I just saw her struggle with cooking cleaning and budgeting. So now I get it. Nobody said I was worthless, I was told the opposite regularly, but my experiences and observations of life as a child moulded my soul. As practitioners we regularly say that children have brains like sponges, but do we realise exactly how much they are soaking up and how they are interpreting this information?*

**Extract from written account: Caroline (1)**

First Person Inquiry, engages us in questions such as Who am I? What is important to me? How do I frame my world? What are my actions in the moment to improve what I am doing?

(Reason and McArdle, 2004) and in so doing:

enables a person to critically explore their own purposes, framings, behaviours and effects and as an outcome of this inquiry to create their own living theories and to improve the quality of their practice.

(Reason and Torbert, 2001: 23)

Caroline, a nursery manager, drawing upon her experience and “embodied knowledge” (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006), was prompted to wonder about the significance of the non-verbal, ‘unspoken’ aspects of practitioner behaviour within her nursery and the effect it was having on the children, this then later became the focus for her inquiry:

*We have some issues with team dynamics at the nursery at the moment. The baby room, consisting of five full time practitioners is a happy, positive place to be. The team work hard together and babies see adults being kind, respectful and supportive to each other...The room with the older two's is the room which has been having problems...with each group complaining about the other group's work standards and performance. Staff members in both groups have said they do not feel like coming into work at times, because of their relationship with another practitioner, but their love for the children has kept them returning. I have spoken to all staff individually and given honest feedback on how to move forward for the sake of the children, but my concern is how the children interpret this whole situation. There is a negative atmosphere in this room and while practitioners are polite to each other, the mood can be quite strained at times. I have a lot of thoughts about why this could be the case- Is communication and consistency an issue because of part time workers? Are there too many staff? Am I not a positive role model?*

*What I think needs to be addressed is the impact this is having on the children and their families. I often say to staff that a child only has one chance to be a two year old, so let's make it the best time they could have, but this is quite superficial and doesn't address our personal role in the life of the child and how being who we are, not what we do, will have more of an impact on that child. When I think of great role models in my life, I don't think of what she did for me or to me, but about who she was that inspired me. For that reason, I try to be the woman I want my daughter to grow up to be. I don't mean I want her to be just like me, but I work hard, I try to be sensitive and understanding yet strong and assertive because that is what I want for her, and I can't teach it unless I am it. I think this may be the way forward for staff at the nursery. Practitioners can only ensure that their moment by moment interactions with children are positive experiences if the practitioner feels inspired, confident, valued, and positive.*

**Extract from written account: Caroline (2)**

### 5.6.1 Constructing new knowledge and new meaning

In \*\* Chapter Four, I argued that drawing upon subjective, inner knowing is of particular significance in knowledge creation and that:

...all human beings bring to the process of learning personal schemas that have been formed by prior experiences, beliefs, values, socio-cultural histories and perceptions. When new experiences are encountered and mediated by reflection, inquiry and social interaction, meaning and knowledge are constructed.

(Lambert, 2003: 19)

Another practitioner provided an example of this, constructing new knowledge and meaning as a consequence of being part of the CI:

*I think everybody needs to remember one of these experiences from their own past, good, or bad, to understand the impact it can have on a child. Because it's these experiences that really shape us into the adults we become. I think that was when I really understood what this project was all about. It's the moment by moment interactions that make the difference. That's what I'll take away from this. That every moment counts. I'm so much more aware now that every word and every action can do so much for a child's self-esteem and confidence... .. By taking part in this enquiry my confidence has improved and hopefully this will improve my practice. It's been great to work with a range of practitioners from all over the city and to share our knowledge and Yes, our expertise!!  
I suppose all I can do is try to make my setting a safe, happy, nurturing place for all the children who attend. I have now become passionate about communicating to other staff the importance of paying attention and being patient with each child; of encouraging them to understand that how they are 'in this present moment' can make more difference to a child than they might realise: for every moment **does** count.*

**Conference account: Anita (SENCO)**

In the CI, the individual understandings of the practitioner were important, but so also was the collaboration in the community of practice that was created as we met together on a regular basis. As each person reflected on what mattered to them, and how they wanted to make a difference to the children they work with, over time they developed their own, dynamic and unique living and evolving theories of their practice which shaped their work and interactions with the children and families they supported. Just as every child needs to feel that there are adults who care about them as individuals, every adult needs that too. Practitioners need to feel valued; they need to experience a feeling of empowerment to use their skills and understandings in the best possible way for the children and families with whom they work. In schools and settings, if practitioners feel that they are valued, that the work they do is important, then they are more likely to be confident, motivated, and energised.

It was this process that the CI encouraged and fostered. It allowed each person, whether practitioner or manager, the time and space to reflect upon their role and what really mattered to them. This prompted them to find answers to the questions they knew would be significant in their own particular contexts; questions that mattered to them about improving

provision and practice. What the CI has shown is that when people share those reflections in a group, and listen to the reflections of others, the effect can be very powerful, it can be transformational. There is a shift in feeling and thinking that can be deep and profound. It is this shift that many people on the collaborative inquiry experienced, a change in mindset, which then has an impact on how they behave in their workplace on a moment by moment basis with the children they care for.

*At the core of the Collaborative Inquiry is that we are all unique practitioners in unique circumstances and there is no one thing we all need to learn to enable us to provide a better service for children...The process of the Inquiry meant we could identify our own areas for development and work through these at our own pace. The group provided a supportive structure to identify what really mattered to us. The significance was the process of learning without even knowing sometimes what the end product would be.*

*We have no doubt whatsoever, that this particular process enabled us to develop our understanding of what makes us unique practitioners and that placing value on our own significance has changed the way we approach our role....Targets aside we have a new approach to evaluating and improving practice, we are more confident in our actions and therefore better role models for the children and we are able to understand the issues facing practitioners to a far greater extent.*

**Feedback account: Reflections on the CI. Sarah (Manager Setting S)**

Towards the end of project everyone worked together to capture what they had learned, in order to create a full- day Conference which we named as “*Every Moment Counts- The Professional Work of Early Years Educators*”. These plans provided the opportunity to celebrate what had been learned and to share this with a wider audience. A number of methods of presentation were used including drama, role play and video recordings, which gave voice to the practitioners themselves and their learning. Almost 150 people attended, including academics, senior managers, representatives from the LA and a wide range of professionals from ECEC. It was a memorable event and evidence of how ‘empowered’ the practitioners were, confidently articulating their research stories and learning on a public platform. Doing this communicated the realisation of the value and importance in the lives of the children they



worked with to everyone; that to provide attention to each unique child ‘in the present moment’ was the means to ensure the well-being of children, one child at a time. I conclude this chapter with comments taken from my research journal which captured my personal reflections at that time and my own evolving theory of practice:

*By working closely with and listening to numerous accounts of the group, I began to know the practitioners in ways that had not been possible for me before. I was able to listen and not just hear. We each started learning with and from each other and this proved to be something that was transformational for all of us. Being part of the CI helped deepen my understanding of different forms of knowledge and how I need to engage more fully with each individual practitioner, supporting them to recognize, value and build upon their ‘embodied knowledge’ and inner knowing. I want to continue to develop ways of working with practitioners that have relevance to everyday practice and for them to find their voice to ensure that any change is not imposed but grows out of true understanding. Creating the opportunity to engage in dialogue in the Collaborative Inquiry, meant acknowledging differing perspectives. Through understanding that everyone’s knowledge held equal importance and working together in a spirit of collaborative participation, a deeper understanding of how the provision was experienced by the children and families was surfaced. Coming together in this way was a new experience for many of us and one we won’t forget.*

**JDS Journal entry: 29<sup>th</sup> June 2011**

The impact of this new understanding and how the ‘potential and possibilities’ of the CI were built upon and developed will be explained in the next chapter, which focuses on the reflective phase of the Research cycle. It will outline some of the sociohistorical and sociocultural perspectives that influenced the context for the research, offering a critique of the dominant worldview and normative assumptions used in educational settings, showing how a culture of evidence based practice is failing to account for what is less tangible but no less important.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Reflective Phase: Making Sense of the Collaborative Inquiry.**

“For those who have the power, it is fundamental that education becomes only techniques...But at its best, education is much more than technique, education is an understanding of the world in order to transform it.....I see as dangerous the possibility of education collapsing into technique, into practice that loses sight of the questions of dreaming, the question of beauty, the question of being, the question of ethics. That would be an education for production, just for marketing.”

(Freire et al, 2014:58)

This chapter focuses on the second phase of my inquiry, and is more analytical in nature, beginning by outlining aspects of the socio-historical and socio-political context that formed the background to the research. It describes several of the professional challenges that I faced during a time of great change and highlights how different views are shaped by assumptions, experiences and ontological positions. It offers a critique of neo-liberal discourse showing how it exerts a profound influence on ECEC, on how it is viewed, how it is funded, and what data is produced to ensure accountability and monitoring of performance. I highlight some of the various ways neo-liberal mechanisms are used to construct a deficit image of the child, the parent, and the Early Years Practitioner (Robert-Holmes and Moss, 2021). I also examine how, in the quest to ‘prove impact through measurement’, a culture of evidence-based practice is failing to account for what is less tangible but no less important (Campbell-Barr, 2018).

## 6.1 Struggling to find a way forward at a time of great change.

For those who have the power, it is fundamental that education becomes only techniques...But at its best, education is much more than technique, education is an understanding of the world in order to transform it.....I see as dangerous the possibility of education collapsing into technique, into practice that loses sight of the questions of dreaming, the question of beauty, the question of being, the question of ethics. That would be an education for production, just for marketing.

(Freire et al., 2014:58)

Freire’s words offer a challenge to educators, to think about the nature and purpose of education. It points to an understanding of education that problematises technique, as something that limits possibilities, one ‘just for marketing’. Freire’s understanding has immense relevance to the current context and relates to my hope, which I explained in the previous chapter, that by establishing a practitioner action research project grounded in the experience of practitioners, an opportunity would be provided to embrace a different way of working and a new way of learning. This project has at its heart a social vision for change (Foster, 1989) and as such, is imbued with ‘personal and social intent’, inspired by Freire’s vision for education as “an understanding of the world in order to transform it” (Freire et al 2014:58). My desire was to develop a democratic approach, one that included the perspective of the practitioner,

acknowledging and valuing their understanding; considering, not ignoring, the complexities of practice; one that moved beyond technical practice to embrace questions of ‘dreaming, beauty, being and ethics’ (ibid).

For many years, educational policy has been placing an increasing emphasis on the need for measured outcomes as a way to show progress in children’s learning, alongside governmental demands for measurable evidence to demonstrate quality in early years settings (Biesta, 2010; Bradbury, 2014; Roberts-Holmes, 2015). Such a climate proves challenging for those in ECEC who want to develop democratic pedagogical approaches. In *Pedagogy of Freedom*, Freire (1998) argues that liberation is not a gift, but a mutual process in an attempt to make education fully human. The European Early Childhood Education Research Association, announcing their 2021 Conference, drew upon Freire’s understandings when they stated that their work has been about promoting democratic pedagogies “where respect and participation is not a given gift, but a mutual process demanding daily transformation to create a relational day to day form of living.” ([www.https://2021.eeceraconference.org/theme-and-strands/](https://2021.eeceraconference.org/theme-and-strands/)) As a practitioner-researcher inquiring into my own practice, the period after the first phase of the action research was indeed a demanding time, requiring an on-going struggle to hold on to the creation of a democratic pedagogy in which respect and participation was central. I agree with Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999:10) when they state how:

....pedagogical work is embedded in the life and world we live in...It is not some decontextualised abstraction that can be readily measured and categorized...making meaning, deepening understanding, or attempting then to make judgements, will be a struggle, full of contradictions and ambiguities.

What I was experiencing in my world of work was indeed a struggle; I was living through it, experiencing difficulties and barriers that I tried to make sense of, but it was impossible for me to fully contextualise it all at the time, to locate and explain it within a wider framing. I was too busy trying to navigate the challenges and ‘keep my head above the water’, too busy meeting the demands asked of me, and too fearful that I might lose the job that meant so much. I felt the struggle, experienced the contradictions and ambiguities, and at times, wondered whether I

belonged in this LA organisation any longer. However, my strength to make meaning and deepen my understanding, came from my engagement with others who shared a passionate desire for getting it right for young children and, as part of first-person research, utilising critical reflection in order to gain new insights. Drawing upon theoretical understandings from the literature also helped me to gain a wider perspective, as I endeavoured to make sense of, and find a way forward for what had been achieved, whilst staying true to myself and the values I believed in.

Earlier, I described the process of the Collaborative Inquiry (CI) and how as a group we formed a learning community within which we all were co-subjects and co-inquirers (Heron 1996). The formation of such an enabling and trusting space, and the understandings that were developed, had a transformational effect on how we saw ourselves and what we did, and demonstrated that early years practitioners were able to create “useful knowledge” (McNiff, 2013:7).

The ‘*Every Moment Counts*’ conference at Liverpool Hope University officially marked the end of the CI, but the participants very much wanted to find a way for us to continue working together and share our learning more widely. However, the conference also meant the end of funding for the project, and it was difficult to see how meeting together would be possible unless we met outside of working hours. What troubled me the most, though, was the reaction of my line manager. The journal entry below was written on the evening of the conference:

*There was an amazing energy, a ‘buzz’ after the conference today.... I was so proud of what the practitioners achieved and there were so many hugely positive comments from a whole range of people. Sue [Senior manager/childcare] was obviously impressed and wants to know how to take it further. Paula [my line manager] although impressed, seemed less enthusiastic. Was it because she had to rush off to attend another meeting? Need time to think and maybe arrange a meeting to find out why I sensed that she was not being authentic (?) in her response to me about today.*

**JDS JOURNAL ENTRY: Every Moment Counts Conference 23/06/11.**

Although the journal entry demonstrates how unsettled I felt, it did not capture the emotional turmoil I was experiencing. I remember, after the Conference had finished and everyone had packed up and left the venue, going outside to take some time to myself to process the events of that incredible afternoon. But what dominated my thoughts was Paula's reaction. I felt so deflated by her polite but insipid response, and I 'knew' with all my being that something of value was being readily dismissed. As I sat on a wall, hidden from view, I could not help but cry tears of frustration, it felt so unfair. Most of us who were involved in the event had arranged to meet later to celebrate the success of the day. I had to 'pull myself together' and be ready to share in the undoubted joy of the others; it was not the right time or place to express anything else or highlight what Paula's reaction had been, but it was this that stayed with me.

Sue was the other Senior Manager who had attended the Conference and there was no doubt that she had been very impressed by the event and congratulated us all. She was the one who had approved the funding for the CI, receiving regular reports about its progress. Nothing like this had been done in the LA before- practitioners from PVI settings were the ones who had written, organised and delivered the day. It had provided the opportunity for all of us to celebrate and share our learning with a large audience of colleagues from across the city, as well as with staff and researchers from the University itself. Informal feedback and written evaluations by the attendees were full of amazement and commendation for the event, a key theme being the level of confidence and passion to make a difference for young children that was evident. Many attendees from other settings wanted to know how they could get involved.

Members of my early years team, QIO EYFS (Quality Improvement Officers Early Years Foundation Stage) had also been at the day, and at our next team meeting were full of praise. They had much to say about how pleased and surprised they had been to see how 'empowered' the practitioners were. The response of Paula, our team leader, was more tempered, lacking the enthusiasm that had been expressed by the others. "That's all well and good Janice, but you need to ask the 'so what?' question. What difference will this make, how can the impact of the project be measured and evidenced?" This question did not surprise me,

but it was one which could not be easily answered. Clearly, there was plenty of qualitative evidence, Paula had been at the event and had seen for herself how confident the practitioners were to share their stories and articulate their practice, yet for her, these were not the measurable outcomes she was looking for. Once again, I tried to explain that the CI was not a 'quick fix,' and how important the process had been in transforming understanding and practitioner confidence, assuring her that because of heightened awareness of practitioner interactions, by using EYFS tracking data, over time the settings involved would be able to demonstrate 'improved outcomes'. If I had been in any doubt before, I knew that the pressure was now on to secure measurable evidence which would 'prove' quality improvements. Nothing else would count. I felt the tension between the pride I felt in what had been achieved through the CI, the increased confidence of practitioners, their commitment to embed the new knowledge that had been created into practice, against the pressure to demonstrate 'impact on outcomes' and measurable results.

In contrast, Sue (Senior manager for Childcare and Sufficiency), wanted to use the practitioners from the CI in a new initiative involving mentoring and supporting other settings. Shortly after the conference, she submitted a proposal to the strategic planning group within the Council, for the new project which she called *'Every Moment Counts- An innovative approach in empowering childcare practitioners to take charge of change to improve outcomes for children'*. The proposal was approved, and Sue was invited to our team meeting to explain how she expected the plan to work. The idea was that the project would have:

The potential to make significant change to practice, strengthening the practice of childcare practitioners and promote ownership of professional practice to improve outcomes for children to:

1. Bring deep long lasting change to how we work together for children (with speech, language, and communication needs).
2. Empower childcare professionals to effectively participate in identifying, supporting, and engaging with other professionals and parents to improve outcomes for children.

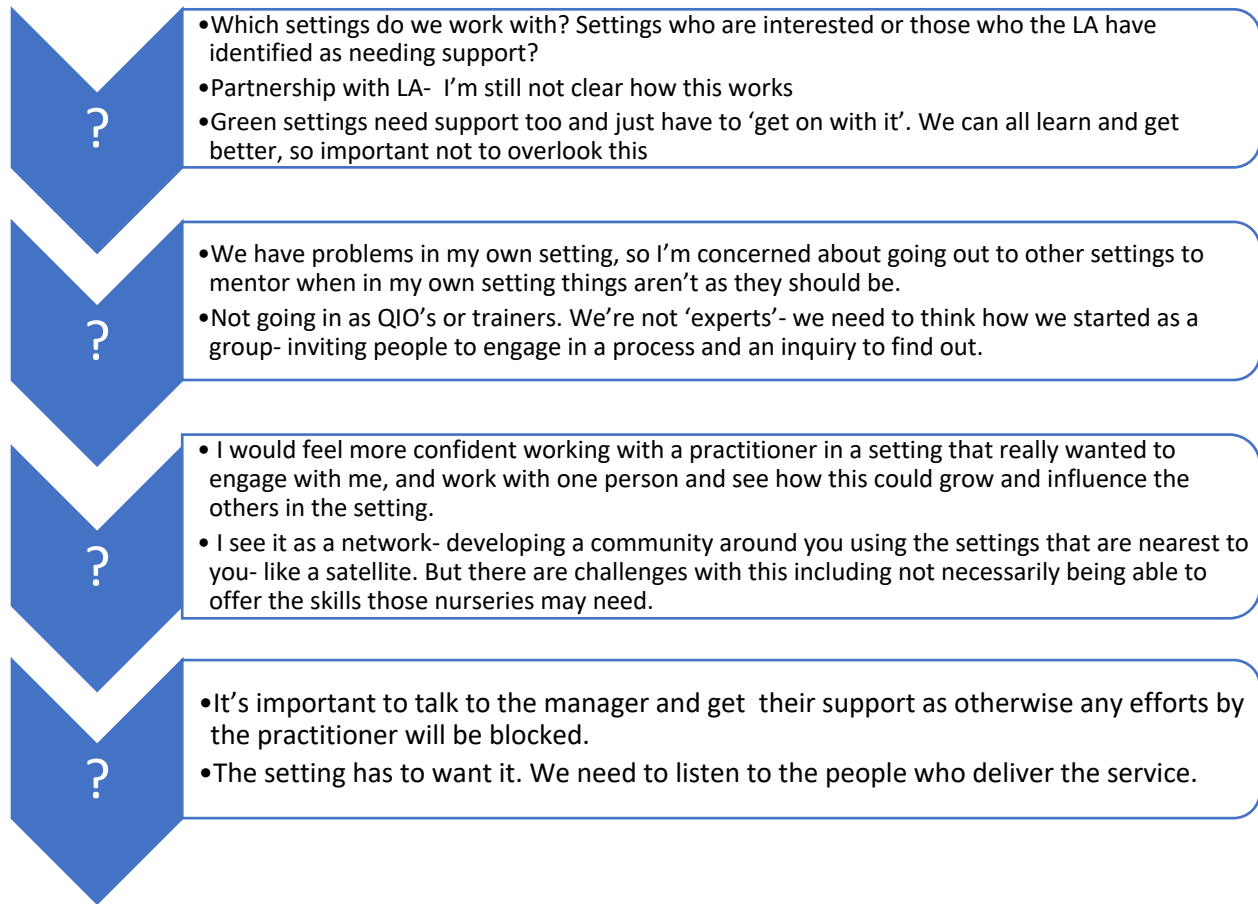
**(From 'Proposal to Strategic Planning Group' 11/11/2011)**

Sue explained how the City Council intended to financially contribute to support ‘*Every Moment Counts*’ by “utilising the passion and drive of the professionals already involved in the programme (i.e. the CI participants) to cascade the programme to their peers in ‘childcare settings’ in a structured mentoring arrangement to be targeted at PVI early years settings.” (Proposal to Strategic Planning Group, 2011).

The team expected me to be pleased about this project, particularly with the phrase ‘Every Moment Counts’ being used, and the links to the CI. Yet I felt disheartened. Although from Sue’s perspective it was well-intentioned, I believed that the ideology behind the programme was in conflict with the ideals and values of the CI. It was a top-down initiative that had been decided for the practitioners, not constructed collaboratively with them. It was another version of the ‘expert model’ with the practitioners from the CI being positioned as experts (‘passionate peer-mentors’) and given the task of cascading their learning to those in settings identified by the LA as needing support. The task of working out how the new programme would be organised, was assigned to me and although I would try to do this as best as I could, I recognised that the new LA Project, could not be understood as a continuation of the Collaborative Inquiry.

The idea was that the practitioners involved in the original CI, were to work with 3 settings assigned by the LA, in order to mentor other childcare practitioners. At one of the first meetings with the ‘peer-mentors’ about the new project, I gathered some of the comments made, which highlight several of the questions and misgivings they had:





To summarise, the CI had been 'high-jacked', it was no longer collaborative, and was being used for other purposes. Beset with problems from the beginning, the innovative peer- mentoring system did not come to fruition. Taking the project in this new direction emphasized the tension between two different ideological approaches and two different, often conflicting worldviews, and illustrates how the values that underpinned the hierarchical, mechanistic worldview of the LA often conflicted with the participatory values that were in evidence in the CI. This is discussed in greater depth later in the chapter, and in *\*\*Figure 5 Illustrating differences between two paradigms and approaches.*

As a practitioner researcher, I was becoming increasingly aware of the mechanistic and hierarchical approaches of school effectiveness recognising that I wanted to work in a way that

was more reflective of my own principles and values. I agree with Whitehead and McNiff (2006) who argue that those who participate in action research:

...need to engage with the issues of how they have been positioned, or have positioned themselves, within situations of social justice or injustice...interrogating their own mental stance as well as their historical and social positioning.

(ibid: 146)

The next section therefore considers the socio-historical and socio-political context for the research. This allows me to locate my experiences and those of the practitioners within a wider framing. Later, I will move on to consider some aspects of neo-liberal ideology contained within policy and the continuing impact this has had on education, with a particular focus on ECEC.

## 6.2 Socio-historical and Socio-political Context

### 6.2.1 The changing landscape of ECEC.

Since the end of the Second World War, UK governments showed a notable lack of political interest in provision of services for pre-school children. Many of the public nurseries that existed in the 1940's were closed soon after the war, with those that remained focusing on the 'social welfare' of children deemed to be at risk. At this time, few women with young children were employed and 'childcare' consisted mainly of informal arrangements made by families themselves (Moss, 2012). By the 1980's things began to change as greater numbers of women were well-educated and wanted to work full time, even after having children. (Brannen and Moss, 1998). However, the availability of early years services to meet these changing family needs was a problem, and private sector nursery provision expanded to fill this need.

Childcare market day nursery provision began to rapidly increase, nearly doubling in England between 1989 and 1994 from 75,400 to 147,600 places. Moreover, these new nursery places were provided by a particular sector: private for-profit providers. During these five years, places in public nurseries fell from 28,800 to 22,300, while private (mainly for-profit) places nearly trebled, from 46,600 to 125,300.

(Moss, 2012:193)

Across the country, early years provision was patchy, with a 'mixed market' model made up of various types of settings. There also existed a distinction between education and care; maintained nursery schools, nursery classes in primary schools, and private schools were primarily involved in education, whilst private day nurseries, childminders, community nurseries, social service day nurseries, workplace creches and playgroups were mostly seen as being involved with care. In 1997, when the Labour government came to power, they therefore inherited a system split between 'early education' (the responsibility of the education department) and 'day care' (the responsibility of health):

a fragmented and mono-purpose array of services, each serving a particular group of children and families with a limited offer; low public investment and provision meeting neither need nor demand; and a workforce predominantly consisting of low-paid, low-qualified and female childcare workers.

(Moss, 2014:347)

During their time in power, the Labour government began investing substantially in the early years. Between 1997 and 2009, spending on education for the early years increased by 84% (Institute for Fiscal Studies 2009:24). A vast range of policy documents were produced, and many new initiatives introduced which greatly changed the landscape of ECEC. There is not scope here to cover them all, but this section will focus on those that had most influence on my work as a QIO.

In 1998, the responsibility for 'childcare services' was transferred from health to education, under the Department for Education and Employment (renamed the Department for Education and Skills in 2001) and there followed a range of policy developments which gave a high priority to childcare and early education as an important vehicle for early intervention and reducing poverty. The 'National Childcare Strategy' (DfEE, 1998) focused on a number of issues that it identified for early education and childcare to address, such as reducing child poverty, raising standards of educational achievement and assuring access to the labour market for parents (particularly mothers). The Government's vision was for every parent to have access to affordable, good quality childcare, which would enable parents to work or seek employment, with consequent reductions in unemployment and child poverty (DfEE 2004).

In 1998, a universal entitlement to early education for 4 year olds for twelve and a half hours per week was put in place, and in 2004, this was extended to include all 3 year olds. Pilot schemes to offer nursery education places for two year olds designated as 'disadvantaged' were also introduced. ECEC was therefore expanded substantially in both the public and private sectors, with the universal entitlement available for families attending maintained provision, as well as for those using childminders and providers from the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector.

### 6.2.2 The neoliberal influence: Childcare as a 'marketplace'.

Marketisation was a key strategy. The childcare 'market' was supported and enhanced with low income families receiving subsidies through tax relief measures, to help them enter and purchase childcare services. This resulted in a situation whereby in ECEC,

Not only were schools competing with each other for children (a feature of the English school scene since 1988, when the market was first introduced into compulsory education), but schools were competing with day nurseries, childminders and other private 'childcare' providers.

(Holmes and Moss, 2021: 64)

The increased number of nursery places was funded through the Nursery Education Grant scheme (NEG). The NEG was paid to LAs, who were responsible for the management of nursery places, and working with providers to assure quality provision. Assuring quality provision was the remit of the team to which I belonged, with the QIO role being to offer "information, training and advice" about the Foundation Stage Curriculum (QCA, 2000) to the schools and settings assigned to us. Childcare sufficiency and welfare requirements were the remit of 'Childcare, Sufficiency, and Family information', a separate team working in another part of the Council.

### 6.2.3 The neoliberal influence: A Curriculum for the Early Years and a Vehicle for Assessment

As public funding for the early years increased, the requirement to show evidence that it was money well-spent soon became apparent. 'The Desirable Outcomes for Children's Learning on Entering Compulsory Education' (DfEE/SCAA, 1996) had been introduced by the previous Conservative government. More commonly known as DLOs 'Desirable Learning Outcomes', was a significant document because, for the first time, a set of national standards that young children were expected to work towards had been issued, the implications of which caused much concern (David, 1998). In 1998, the newly appointed Labour government tasked the 'Qualifications and Curriculum Authority' (QCA) to revise the DLOs and to create a statutory baseline assessment for children entering primary school, and the following year, the 'Early Learning Goals' (QCA, 1999) was published. There was considerable criticism,

particularly from the early years sector, as learning goals for young children had not been formally consulted on; the idea of 'goals' for learning was widely condemned, and in particular some of the goals for literacy were felt to be inappropriate.

(Staggs, 2012:144)

In 2000, the 'Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage' (CGFS) (QCA 2000) was launched, providing a framework for those working with children aged 3 to 5 years. This had been developed by a working party of early years experts and academics, drawing on research evidence and experiential understanding about how young children learn and develop. Through its aims and principles, the CGFS affirmed the importance of play throughout the Foundation Stage, and "for the first time, this phase of education had a distinct identity with explicit intended outcomes" (Aubrey, 2004:634). The CGFS outlined how observational assessments of children were to be made using the ELGs and 'stepping stones'. It advised that these should be carried out in a way that recognised that children develop and learn in different ways, and that a 'tick box' approach should be avoided. The guidance argued that whilst age may be a guide to stage of development and learning, practitioners needed to make their own, observation based judgments of each 'unique child'. The CGFS was central to our work as QIOs and provided a powerful 'tool' for discussion of important pedagogical principles when working with settings to

develop their practice. However, it took another two years before Birth to Three Matters (BTM) (DfES, 2002) was published, which was non-statutory guidance for those working with babies and toddlers up to the age of 3 years.

In 2003 'Every Child Matters' (ECM) was introduced, which was a comprehensive programme of reform of children's services, an agenda, which under the newly named 'Department for Children Schools and Families', had implications for education, health, social services, and voluntary and community organisations. It sought to protect children at risk within the framework of universal services and emphasised the importance of multi-agency collaboration. ECM adopted a common set of 5 outcomes relevant for all services for children and placed a new emphasis on partnerships and an integrated approach to working with the youngest children in schools, and those attending PVI settings and Children's Centres (Moss 2014). ECM was a major policy initiative which was well-received. It aimed to address social inequalities and to demonstrate a commitment to children's rights. As a new member of the QIO Team, who went on to undertake my M.A. in 'Integrated Provision for Children and Families', I was committed to the ECM agenda and did as much as I could to contribute to the development of joined up working practices across services, especially in my role as Lead Area SENCo. The QIO team was directly involved in contributing to the establishment of new Children's Centres across the City, providing CPD for staff teams. We were assigned named Children's Centres and sat on the governing board to oversee the development of services. We were also involved in the appointment and support of the qualified teachers who were assigned to each centre and worked closely with them to develop provision and practice for the children who attended.

One of the first things the Labour government did after coming to power in 1997, was to commission Europe's largest longitudinal research study into quality in early years provision. The resulting research, which compared children who attended different kinds of provision, was published in various stages with the final report published in 2008 (Sylva et al 2008). The *Effective Provision of Pre-School Education* (EPPE) study highlighted the importance of high quality learning and found that a play-based curriculum, high adult-child ratios and highly

trained staff were guarantees of the highest quality which resulted in the best outcomes for children up to the end of key stage one (Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva, 2004).

EPPE's major finding was that good quality pre-school provision provides an effective means of reducing social exclusion. This finding has been 'extremely influential' and has had 'a considerable impact' (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2008:24) upon Government policy such as the Every Child Matters (DfES 2004) agenda and the subsequent 2006 Childcare Act which in turn paved the way for the EYFS.

(Robert-Holmes, 2012:32)

The influence of the EPPE research is evident in '*Choice for Parents, The Best Start for Children, A Ten Year Strategy for Childcare*' (DfES, 2004), which recognised the significance of high quality early years experiences as having the potential to transform children's lives. What was also apparent in this policy document, was the clear focus on outcome and performance measures driven by centralised action, characterised by a culture of standardisation (Grenier, 2017).

The 10-year strategy outlined the plan to produce a single guidance framework for those working with children from birth to 5, bringing together BTTM and the CGFS, and incorporating statutory national standards for health and safety, as well as minimum staffing ratios and wider aspects of care. Subsequently, 'The Childcare Act 2006' (DfES) established the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) as a distinct phase of education for the youngest children. This Act was the first to be concerned solely with childcare and early years, and in the following year, the 'EYFS Framework for Learning and Development' became the statutory document for schools and settings working with children from Birth to 5 years (DfES 2007).

### 6.2.3 The Continuing Divide Between Education and Childcare

It was hoped that the new EYFS would abolish the distinction between education and care that had haunted early years for so long. Yet despite this laudable aim, it should be noted that there continues to be a 'split' between the PVI sector and the maintained sector. In England, the numbers of children 0-3 years attending PVI settings account for the majority of pre-school placements, whilst those taking up funded places in maintained provision in Nursery Schools

are far lower (Roberts-Holmes 2012; Gooch, and Powell 2013). Children aged 4-5 years predominantly attend primary school reception classes, which are funded by the state and where they are taught by fully qualified teachers. This has led to a situation where access, funding and the workforce remain divided, reflecting a strong and continuing tendency to see 'childcare' and 'education' as separate' (Moss, 2012).

The intended formulation of the statutory EYFS curriculum... was to unite the state maintained and the Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) sector through their joint care and education responsibilities. Yet so far, reform has failed to find common ground in the establishment of a unifying title that is representative of the responsibilities, values and knowledge base that early years practitioners possess.

(Basford, 2019:779)

The significance and relevance of this observation was evident in how the practitioners involved in the research saw themselves in comparison to those working in schools and maintained nursery provision. For example, Jessica, Room leader and SENCO, described how her nursery setting had been amalgamated with a nearby Roman Catholic Primary School to form a Children's Centre on the school site. She explained how the majority of the staff from the original day care provision had been unhappy with the change, with many feeling undervalued in the work they were doing. Jessica recalled how upset she had been when the LA had produced a leaflet outlining the services the new Children's Centre would provide. It included a statement that the new centre would provide:

*Education and Childcare:*

- *Childcare from 0-5 years*
- *Early Education led by teachers for 3 and 4 year olds*
- *Our Foundation Stage children (3-5 year olds) will merge with Fairgreen nursery and reception class to create a Foundation Unit.*

In response to reading this, Jessica said: *"It made me think what on earth do they think I've been doing for the past 8 years? All of us in the [PVI] nursery have worked for many years providing an education for very many children, but now we feel completely undermined as it*



*makes us feel like what we work hard to do, with the babies, toddlers and in the pre-school room is as nothing as to what the teacher will now do in the Children's Centre."*

(Jessica, Room Leader and Early Years SENCO).

Organisation of the ECEC workforce is problematic and continues to reflect the divide between childcare and education. How this is seen, understood, and with what value that is inscribed, is deeply embedded in how parents, practitioners and policy makers think about the early years, with a split that is not only conceptual but also structural (Moss, 2006). The implications of this are further discussed later in the chapter, \*\*6.5 Neoliberal influences in ECEC.

#### 6.2.4 The neoliberal influence: Assessment, Accountability and Control

The launch of the EYFS in 2007, was shortly accompanied by the EYFSP (Early Years Foundation Stage Profile) (QCA 2008) which is the statutory assessment for the final term of the EYFS.

Reception class teachers are tasked with completing this document for each child they teach. These summative judgments, which originally were based on 69 Early Learning Goals (ELG) use observational assessments across the six areas of learning, involving 117 statements against which a child's progress is to be judged. The system for gathering assessments, making judgments and then moderating them with others, was time consuming and bureaucratic, and faced much criticism.

Teachers engaged in practices that were in keeping with the rules of the EYFS Profile requirements, but also showed their ambivalence towards it.....the collection of evidence in individual EYFS Profile folders was seen as hugely time-consuming, but necessary for accountability purposes.

(Bradbury 2014:333)

Bradbury's research, using ethnographic case study evidence from two schools, demonstrates the frustration of many teachers across England. Bradbury captured the impact the profile was having on teaching, arguing that this could be understood as:

[T]wo processes running in parallel: first, a process of producing evidence which exists only to be checked, and secondly a process of gathering 'knowledge' which will eventually be used to score the children. They do not necessarily need to interact, until

the final point when the LA moderator relates the folder to the EYFS Profile scores. This is the performance required, and the teachers have little choice but to comply.

(ibid: 334)

Drawing on Ball's (2003) understanding of the 'terrors of performativity'. Bradbury highlights the constant pressure that the 'performative' technology the EYFSP exerts, whereby:

The 'enacted fantasy' of accurate assessment does not happen in one moment, but must be built up and performed throughout the year, in the production of folders of evidence and through continual observation. The fictive accuracy of the EYFS Profile must be re-signified through the regular collection of data and the allocation of points, up until the final scores.

(ibid: 335)

As QIOs we received training to become EYFSP moderators, and our role was extended to include visiting a designated selection of schools to discuss their data and view the evidence for the judgements they had made. My feelings about this reflected the wider concerns about the assessment procedure, because now the learning and assessment grids across the six areas of learning, which had previously been seen as a guide for practitioners as how best to support children, were being used as a tool for assessment and data collection. The ELGs had become an assessment instrument through which not only children's achievement could be judged, but also how the effectiveness of early years settings, schools and LAs could be determined. In our different ways, we were all contributing to, and sustaining a culture of performativity (Ball 2003). Although in 2012, the number of ELGs was reduced from 69 to 17, assessment continued to be outcomes based, with all data having to be submitted to the LA for scrutiny, the analysis of which was submitted to the Department for Education and Skills. From its introduction, this placed increased stress and pressure on Early Years Leads and Reception class teachers, because evidence for each learning outcome, for each child, was needed in order to provide what was required to satisfy the external bodies. Furthermore, despite the EYFS clearly stating through its commitments, that 'all areas of learning and development are equally important and inter-connected' (DfES Practice Guidance, 2007: 5), the emphasis of government policy, through the national strategy, continued to be on literacy and numeracy (Staggs, 2012). Monitoring progress and judging school (and setting) performance on outcome data, is reductive and it fails to capture all that is meaningful, complex and diverse about the child and

their context. Assessing children by an isolated 'snapshot' of their progress, is problematic and I agree with Burgess- Macey et al (2020) who argue that such an approach makes no sense when viewed against our knowledge of how development in young children actually happens.

There is no statutory requirement to provide a valid and meaningful view of how a child is progressing or pay any attention to the differences between children's backgrounds; and no evidence is sought from documentation by practitioners trained to observe children's learning in real and dynamic environments. There is a wealth of evidence of good practice in ongoing observation and record keeping that has been cast aside in the search for a spurious objectivity.

(Burgess-Macey et al, 2020:148)

However, by such top-down accountability measures, the government increased its control over the work of early years practitioners through both the curriculum content and assessment of the early years (Basford and Bath, 2014). Pedagogically, this has resulted in the emergence of a growing tension between a holistic, play-based approach to learning, and learning approaches undertaken in order to achieve pre-determined and measurable outcomes. This 'shift' has marked a movement away from children's social, emotional and creative development to one related to school readiness, with a particular emphasis on literacy and numeracy (Basford 2019). Lesley Staggs summed up the situation that we were witnessing as it unfolded, where the centrality of play as a powerful vehicle for learning began to become undervalued and overlooked.

Those who advocated more formal approaches to teaching and learning could often show the short-term progress in children's learning that government was seeking. The appetite for taking a long-term view was never strong enough amongst policy makers and politicians, concerned with a quick impact and their next election prospects, to give play the key role argued for by the early years sector through to the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage.

(Staggs, 2012: 149)

That said, there were also many practitioners who welcomed the higher status afforded to the early years by it being designated as a distinct 'key stage' in its own right, and with it the duty to administer statutory testing. For them, this enhanced their professionalism (Bradbury 2014). Others though, felt that assessment and accountability measures bound them into more

centralised control with a resulting loss of autonomy.

Schools are being tied more tightly into a system of remote control, operated by funding mechanisms, testing systems, certification, audit and surveillance mechanisms. In this environment, there is an inevitable de-professionalization of teachers. Teachers' capacity to make autonomous judgment about curriculum and pedagogy in the interests of their actual pupils is undermined.

(Connell, 2013:108)

Analysis of this “system of remote control” and de-professionalisation will be discussed more fully later in the chapter, \*\*6.5 Neoliberal influences in ECEC, but it is not only teachers working with children in the Reception Year whose autonomy is being undermined. The assessment process is problematic across the whole of the EYFS. Early Years Practitioners are caught in a dilemma between, on the one hand, providing evidence for measurement of progress against age and stage of development, assessing whether the child is at the expected level of development or above or below it, as well as, on the other hand, ensuring that they provide each child with a range of experiences that provide opportunities for children to make meaning through their natural desire to move and use all their senses, communicate, listen, talk and ask questions, represent and make, observe, imitate, imagine and create stories. When a practitioner observes a child, this involves noticing not just *what* they are learning, but how they make sense of that learning, their attitudes, dispositions, engagement, and this takes great skill. When trying to understand children's learning, we should not lose sight of the complexity of the process and need to ensure that meaning making is not reduced targets and a tick box approach (Carr, 2001).

Practitioners have to ensure that they are measuring what truly matters and not simply focusing on things that are easily measured. Basford and Bath (2014) describe this as “playing the assessment game” involving two competing goals, highlighting the tension that exists between conforming to policy regulations “whilst still attempting an approach which sits more closely with a democratic pedagogy” (ibid: 123).

Herein lies the dilemma for ECE practitioners: to achieve one goal of the assessment game, they must follow regulations and be technically rational in their practice.... Alongside this, they have a duty to ensure children are 'ready' for the next steps in their educational career...This leads to the other goal of the game, competing with the drive for conformity and measurement. This is the goal that is concerned with attitude and disposition towards learning; that takes a more intentionally aware and democratic approach to the learning process, using a 'relational pedagogy'.

(Basford and Bath, 2014: 123)

Opportunities to work with practitioners, in visits to their settings, or in network meetings, involving them in reflections and discussions of their pedagogical approaches, and the challenges they were facing, was the aspect of my role that I most enjoyed, but changes to the working practices of my team, soon meant opportunities to do this were restricted.

### 6.3 A Time of Austerity

When the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government came to power in 2010, they dismantled Labour's 'Every Child Matters' strategy for children and families with its 5 outcomes of: being healthy, staying safe, enjoy and achieve, making a positive contribution and economic well-being. There was now a much narrower focus on "achievement" and a stronger school readiness agenda which became even more apparent in the revised EYFS Curriculum (DfE 2012). Although the Coalition government continued to emphasise the importance of the 'foundation years' as a key way to tackle child poverty and improve children's life chances through a social mobility strategy, central support for ECEC was greatly reduced, so that:

Real spending per child on early education, childcare and Sure Start services fell by a quarter between 2009-10 and 2012-2013, from £2,508 to £1,867.

(Stewart, 2015:1)

Austerity meant that LAs across the country had to begin a process of saving costs through staff redundancies and administrative efficiencies, in an attempt to protect frontline services such as support services for schools and non-statutory services for children, young people and families, including early years (FPI, 2021). Across the country, the number of Children's Centres was reduced, often with the outsourcing of Children's Centre services to private and voluntary sector providers (Churchill, 2013). Ringfenced funding that had prevented Sure Start funding

being used for other purposes was removed so that early years services had to compete for funding within the LA itself. Introduction of 'payment by results' funding for children's centres meant that services had to be targeted on the most needy families (Stewart 2015). Although all LA areas had substantial cuts made to their budgets, LAs in the more disadvantaged areas "took a proportionally larger hit than others" (ibid:3). Liverpool, as one of the most deprived local authorities in the country, had to face some of the greatest reductions in funding from central government (Hastings et al 2012; Clifford et al 2013), and was required to cut its budget by £173.4 million over a period of just 3 years. By 2017 there was a 52% reduction in Government funding allocated to the Council.

Up until the funding cuts and restructuring, the QIO Team to which I belonged had a certain autonomy and were accommodated in our own 'Learning and Development Early Years Base'. At that time, we were a close team and had a shared understanding of the principled approach of the EYFS Framework and were committed to supporting the practitioners we worked with to develop pedagogical understanding in their work with young children.

The impact of the funding cuts was swift, and within a short period of time we lost one full time member of our team, and funding to sustain the involvement of the Children Centre teachers was also withdrawn (Butler, 2013). Across the whole of the council, re-structuring and financial efficiencies were made. Our team was moved to the central 'School Effectiveness' office, becoming part of a much larger group of School Improvement Officers. Whilst the majority of our work was with ECEC (PVI settings, Nursery schools, Childminders and Children's Centres), 'School Effectiveness' worked exclusively in schools, and it was an awkward pairing. At first it was quite challenging for us to be assimilated into this new structure, and we were all aware that Paula, our line manager, was under particular pressure to integrate our working practices with the requirements of the wider school effectiveness team. We were informed of the changes that were happening to us, but there was little if any consultation. It was a difficult time for all, and then another member of our team left to take up a position elsewhere and was not replaced.

## 6.4 Quality - a contested arena

During this time, 'Early Learning Matters', a new strategic group of Senior Managers was established, chaired by the Head of School Effectiveness. The aim was to develop stronger partnership working across services, creating more joined up ways of thinking in relation to meeting the needs of the youngest children in the city. It was this group that agreed changes to our working practices and introduced an accountability framework to monitor the impact of our "support and challenge" in the schools and settings we worked with. A new system was introduced, designed to target our work more effectively. The 'RAG' rating system (red, amber, green) enabled schools and settings to be placed in a particular category depending on the result of their latest OfSTED inspection. Later, in 2014, OfSTED were designated as the 'sole arbiter of quality' and LAs were instructed to rely solely on the OfSTED inspection judgement as "the benchmark of quality" (DfES, 2014:8).

Each member of the team was allocated more settings to be responsible for and the time given for 'Network Meetings' e.g. SEND Cluster meetings was halved. There was a sliding scale for QIO time, with those settings in a 'red' category being apportioned most support. Those categorized 'green' received little, if any, direct contact with the team. New monitoring and action planning forms were introduced which impacted greatly on the nature of our visits, with more time being spent with the manager in the office scrutinizing 'Quality Improvement Audits', EYFS progress-tracking documents and action plans. This meant there was less time available to observe and offer support in the rooms with the SENCOs and key persons working directly with the children. Accountability was the watch word at every level. Our work became more bureaucratic and less relational, and I felt pulled into a way of working that I felt increasingly dissatisfied with. Just as Connell had described the de-professionalisation of teachers through being tied more tightly into a system of "remote control" affecting their capacity "to make autonomous judgment about curriculum and pedagogy in the interests of their actual pupils" (Connell 2013: 108) I felt that I too was losing my autonomy, with my work becoming more directed with specific areas to focus on. Positioned as a 'Quality Improvement Officer' the remit was on ensuring 'quality', but the EYFS Quality Improvement Audit was

limited in its scope and presented a reductive view about what ‘quality’ looked like and this troubled me. Much of my work now, and the work of the practitioners had become characterised by bureaucracy and standardisation, involving practitioners and managers working through the lengthy audit tool in order to evaluate their quality and effectiveness. As mentioned earlier, opportunities to visit settings, to listen, to observe and offer support had been severely curtailed. Time for meaningful dialogue was limited, and even though settings may have had different priorities, the focus of the QIO visit was to monitor their performance through analysis of the “Quality Improvement Audit” they had completed. From my reading and growing understanding of different epistemological positions I knew that the concept of quality was contested, and was a dominant discourse, taken for granted by many that “there is some thing -objective, real, knowable-called quality” (Dahlberg et al 2002:4). But why? Who decides what quality is? Can it be measured? Why does it need to be? Searching for the answers to these questions I began to understand that:

Quality is not just a desirable feature, it is a political tool, a value-laden term that seeks to shape understandings as to the purpose of early years services and what they should look like.

(Campbell-Barr and Leeson, 2016:12)

In 1999, Dahlberg, Pence and Moss wrote a seminal piece of work entitled *‘Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care’* which greatly influenced my thinking. They confront ‘the problem with quality’ and argue that it is inscribed with particular positivist assumptions and values and as such is neither self-evident or neutral, showing how the concept of quality does not accommodate different contexts, values, diversity, subjectivity, complexity or multiple perspectives. Rather, it is used to serve the interests of managerialism in a neo-liberal system.

The search for high returns in a competitive marketized society calls for the setting of performance standards as well as of precise and measurable outcomes for assessing performance, enabling a constant drive to improve performance. These standards need to be expert derived, evidence based and reliably measurable; they must, too, be universal, objective and stable.... ‘quality’ is short hand for a standard of technical performance against which early childhood services can be evaluated, at any time and in any place...a technology of normalisation, establishing norms against which performance can be assessed, so shaping policy and practice.

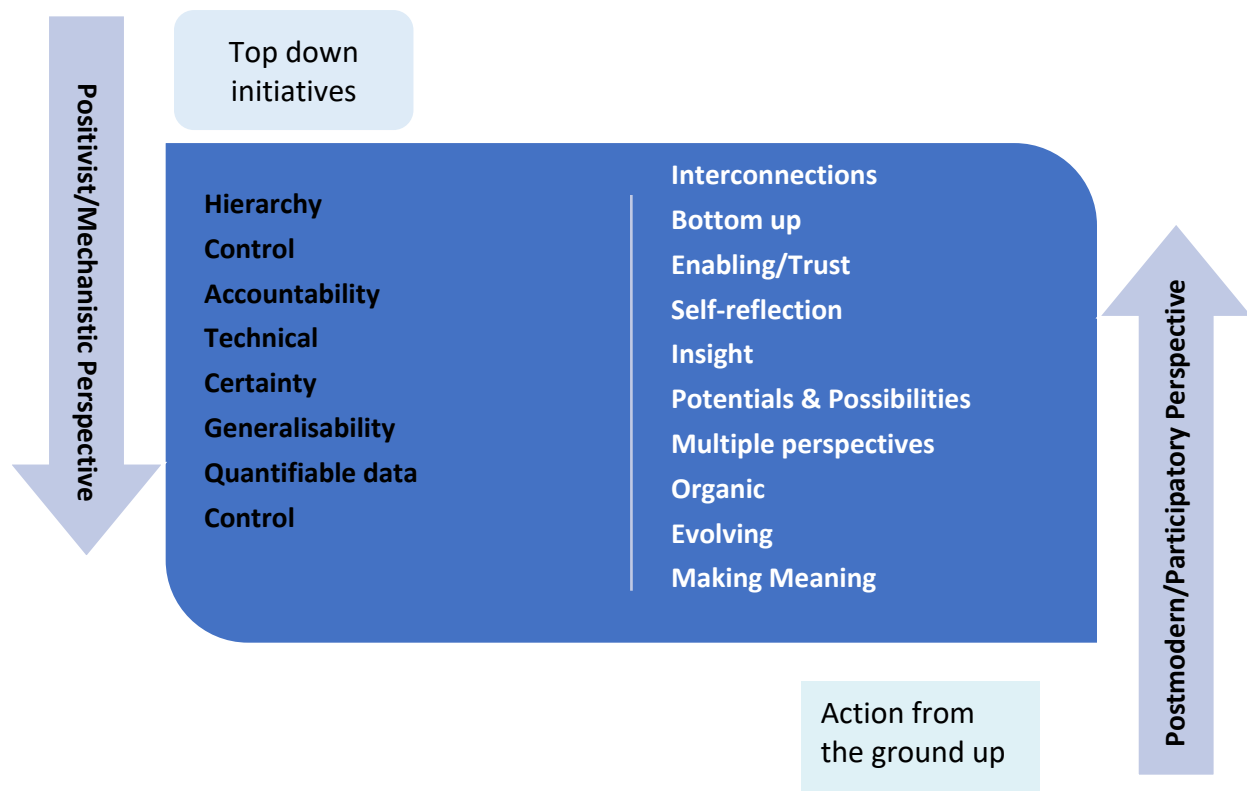
(Moss 2019: 42)



### 6.4.1 Tensions Between Two Differing Paradigms

As a QIO, I was part of this mechanistic system, contributing to a technology of normalisation which was in conflict with what I sought to do and the way I wanted to work. I felt pulled in two different directions. I knew my settings well, was aware of their different contexts, the different challenges the practitioners faced, the different priorities they had, but in this culture of performativity (Ball 2003) this was not taken account of. I now felt uncomfortable when visiting settings, having to limit our discussions to the answers given in the quality audit proforma. It was like I had become a puppet for the LA, going through the motions to fulfil the tasks I had been set because it was my job. Accountability was the watch word at every level. Our work became more bureaucratic and less relational.

As a practitioner-researcher, I recognised that I was caught in a 'paradigmatic divide' between two very different epistemological positions, one reflecting the approach of the LA that sought to gain certainty and control, and the other more open ended and fluid - and I knew which one was more in keeping with my worldview and value base.



*Figure 5 Illustrating differences between two paradigms and approaches.*

The tension between two different ideological approaches and two different worldviews, meant that the hierarchical, mechanistic worldview of the LA, often conflicted with the participatory values and relational ways of working that I wanted to pursue. But such cognitive understanding did not help me, my lived reality was that I felt trapped, working in a system that I no longer believed in, and if I was found out, or if I did not conform, I would be disciplined, perhaps even losing my job and livelihood. I had to 'toe the line' and felt powerless to act in any other way. Furthermore, the impact of the austerity measures meant the role of the LA was changing and the future was uncertain. Would we still have a team, still have a job? How would I be able to remain true to the values that sustained me and work in a way in which I could remain true to myself?

The significance of what had occurred in the CI, had provided an alternative narrative to the work of school effectiveness and quality improvement, and provided me with a sense of hope that there were other possibilities, other ways of working with the practitioners.

The understandings of Stephen Ball (2016) resonated with me. Discussing Foucault's work on governmentality as a vehicle for power, Ball highlights how

The individual is the site of power where it is enacted or resisted/refused but never in an absolute sense, rather within multiple 'strategic skirmishes'. The issue is one of recognition of and engagement with relations of power.

(Ball, 2016: 1131)

The phrase 'engaging with relations of power', has been helpful to me in understanding and explaining my actions and feelings at that time. Although I felt anxious, I was not powerless, subjectivity being the point of contact between self and power and is the site where "a struggle over and against what we have become, what it is that we do not want to be" (ibid: 1143) can begin to be worked out. Ball describes how "the activity of the subject within a field of constraints, crafting or recrafting one's relation to oneself and to others" involves "both critical work, destabilising accustomed ways of doing and being, and positive work, opening spaces in which it is possible to be otherwise." (ibid: 1135). My research provided a vehicle through which I could do such 'recrafting'.

I thought about my research question:

**How can I work collaboratively with early years' practitioners to enable them to perceive and value themselves as knowledge creators in order to generate quality\* learning environments in which children can flourish?**

(\* the word quality was later changed to rich)

The phrase '*quality* learning environments' started to feel awkward to me as I began recognising how value laden the word 'quality' is, how associated it was with a way of working that I felt uncomfortable with. The CI had shown that it was possible to work with others, to

dialogue, to reflect, to act and to create new knowledge, a forum for “meaning making” in relationship with others (Dahlberg et al 2013). It enabled us to deepen our understanding of the pedagogical choices that we make, ethical choices based on shared values and beliefs about the learning and development of young children.

Whereas the concept of quality ends with a decontextualized and objective statement of fact, often expressed as a number based on scores from a rating scale, the concept of meaning making calls for a continuous process of reflection and interpretation that may result in occasional judgements of value, judgements for which the judges must take responsibility rather than hide behind statistical pretension to objectivity. The concept of ‘quality’ might be said to lead to a form of managerial accounting, whereas the concept of ‘meaning making’ is much nearer to the idea of democratic accountability.  
(Moss, 2019: 44)

It is significant that Moss links the idea of ‘meaning making’ to democratic approaches to accountability. This appealed to, and intrigued me, as I wanted the work and research I was involved in to be democratic, to include the voice of the practitioner, the parent, the child in meaning making.

## 6.5 Neoliberal influences in ECEC

### 6.5.1 Scientism, Evidence-based practice, and the Constriction of Democracy

It troubles me how research is currently being used in education, with its strong emphasis on positivist approaches for data collection and analysis in order to justify effectiveness of one technological approach over another; a modernistic and unquestioning acceptance of a positivist paradigm that ‘truth’ can be objectified, studied and known.

Challenging a narrow ‘technical’ role for education, as well as recognition of the need to acknowledge the relational aspects of learning, reminds us that the purpose of a ‘good education’ is more than the production of measured outcomes, but has ethical, political, and democratic dimensions (Gunter 2001; Biesta 2010). Moss argues that primarily, education is a ‘political practice’ and refers to the words of Malaguzzi, who said that education is “always a

political discourse whether we know it or not. It is about working with cultural choices, but clearly it also means working with political choices.” (Cagaliari et al, 2016:267). Peter Moss is critical of neoliberalism for its denial of politics in favour of technical practice,

In effect neoliberalism has long ago made its political choices and no longer wishes to discuss them, placing them in a drawer labelled ‘taken for granted’. All that matters now is to identify and apply the correct human technologies to implement those choices.

(Moss, 2019: 49)

Questioning the nature and purpose of education, what is it for, why are we doing this, what values are informing our decisions? Are all important political questions that should be thought about, and argued over, to generate a more democratic and ethical view of education, one which recognises there is no one fixed answer, but a range of alternative choices.

Political questions of image, purpose and values should generate a democratic politics of education, in which alternative answers to such questions are recognised, valued and deliberated upon, creating an education in which ends come before means, in which technical practice is subsumed into political practice. Neoliberalism, with its impoverished view of education, has stifled any signs of such a democratic politics of education.

(Robert-Holmes and Moss 2021: 54)

Over the last decade, much has been written about neo-liberalism, uncovering the materialist ontology that informs it. In the next section, I focus on neoliberalism and how the ideas and thinking from its particular perspective and worldview has had considerable influence on education and how ECEC is conceptualised and practised. Education policy has always been influenced by different ideologies, different values, attitudes and beliefs with political and educational consequences (Forrestor and Garratt, 2016). It would be unfair to attribute all the challenges faced in education to neoliberalism, but the mechanisms of neoliberalism-competition, ‘choice’, accountability, standardised testing, monitoring and inspection, has meant that neoliberalism, as Vandenbroeck (2021) argues, is having a

[P]rofound influence on the daily practices in early childhood education, on its funding mechanisms, on what data are produced, on inspection, performance and

accountability, on the image of the child, the image of the parent and the image of the early childhood workforce.

(ibid: xii)

Stephen Ball describes neoliberalism as a “mobile technology” that “migrates and is selectively taken up in diverse political contexts” (Ball, 2021: xv). It is manifested in and across various settings and political, social and economic spheres. It does not have one homogenous identity but has a “complex mediated and heterogenous kind of omnipresence” (Mirowski, 2013:52), that operates and exerts influence on a global scale (Barnett and Bagsha 2020). Yet, it was only as part of the research process, and when I started to engage with the literature, that I began to understand something of what neo-liberalism is, and the powerful and ubiquitous effect it is having on society and how individuals behave and act in the world. Working as a QIO, I was witnessing its effects, but at the time, could not name it.

It might be said that neoliberalism hides itself in full view, ‘almost to the point of passing as the “ideology of ideology” (Mirowski, 2013:28).

(Roberts-Holmes and Moss 2021: 4)

Walton argues that “intellectual thinking has been colonised by a neoliberal ideology which has been insidiously permeating society for many decades, resulting in widespread ignorance about the nature of the forces that are controlling the lives of citizens generally....and the nature of education and educational research.” (Walton, 2018:1).

Certainly, education has been greatly affected by the rise of a neoliberal political, economic and cultural agenda. Ways of organization and control are imported from business to public institutions. In an ‘audit society’, public institutions have to make themselves auditable, on a model imported from business accountancy (Power, 1997). Increasingly, education has been defined as a quasi-marketplace, and educational institutions have been forced to conduct themselves more and more like profit-seeking firms. From the 1970’s, changes to policy have been introduced by different governments, and in different ways, but what is common to them all is an increasing grip of market logic on schools, universities and ECEC (Connell, 2013). In my own experience, the ‘School Effectiveness Team’ under which I worked went on to develop its

‘corporate image’. It had to change how it was structured and develop its ‘brand’, marketing its services to schools and settings in the local area and beyond, in order to become self-funding and survive.

### 6.5.2 Whose meanings and knowledge gets to count?

The way people talk and think about the world reflects the dominance of the discourse, and neoliberalism has affected our thinking to “become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in and understand the world” (Harvey, 2005:3). Marketisation, has seeped into the language we use to describe ourselves and our work, technical terms from economics and business such as ‘outcomes’, ‘evidence-based’, ‘interventions’, ‘investment’, ‘capacity building’, ‘performance review’ are used unquestionably in educational settings. It is a dominant narrative that has “sunk its roots deep into everyday life” (Mirowski, 2013:28) and has come to

Dominate our political and economic systems, and almost every aspect of our lives...seeping into our language, our understanding of the choices we face and our conception of ourselves.

(Monbiot, 2017:29)

But the underlying assumptions of its persuasive rhetoric are disguised (Apple, 1990) and because of the inter-relationship between beliefs, knowledge, behaviour and power, what can be said and thought about is not some objective truth, although it becomes accepted as the truth. In this way, people’s thought processes can themselves come to embody and make stronger particular regimes of power (Forrester and Garratt, 2016).

Dominant discourses think, talk and act as if they represent the incontrovertible truth, as if they provide the only valid meaning, as if they are the authorised version of the topic on hand.

(Moss, 2019:20)

Dominant discourses seek to impose in Foucault’s words a ‘regime of truth’, affecting how an issue is understood, which limits the possibilities of debate and how individuals should act.

Drawing on Foucault's understandings, Glenda MacNaughton describes how a regime of truth, directs how we construct the world and what is seen as 'the truth':

In Foucault's terms, institutionally produced and sanctioned truths govern and regulate us. Each field of knowledge.... expands by developing officially sanctioned truths that govern normal and desirable ways to think, feel and act. For instance, the field of early childhood studies has grown through developing sets of truths about the normal and desirable way to be a child and an early childhood educator that are sanctioned and systematised by government, by professional associations and by the academy.

(MacNaughton, 2005:29-30)

The inter-relationship between beliefs, behaviour, knowledge and power, and of the realisation that the different meanings we give to the world reflect differences in perspective, position, and assumptions, the question becomes "whose meanings and knowledge gets to count and be accepted (widely, though not necessarily) as true, and what regime of truth comes to govern a certain topic or field?" (Moss, 2019:91).

The securing of measurable results has come to dominate discussions about early childhood education. The emphasis is on standards and evidence of impact on outcomes as well as evidence-based practice based on technical approaches and scientific data to 'prove' "what works" (Biesta, 2010).

This approach, however, fails to consider exactly what "working" means, resulting in a situation where "the debate on what works seems to be entirely dominated by the discourse of 'return on investments' reducing the meaning of education to profit maximalisation." (Vandenbroeck, 2021: 191). Developing his argument further, Vandenbroeck highlights how those working in educational research should stop presenting measurements as neutral, and instead debate about them as ideological choices.

The choice to measure, and if so, what to measure, the choice to compare (and what to compare), the choice to document (and what to document), the choice to listen to some voices more than others, these are all choices that researchers make. If we start to present these as choices, rather than apolitical and objective science, we can begin to question the state of affairs, critically examine the implicit



assumptions that underpin our research and start to bring in the utopian thought that is not only inevitable, but also indispensable for liberating pedagogies.  
(ibid:193)

Creating spaces to do this is challenging, when the current educational research climate is dominated by an unquestioning belief in an “apolitical and objective science” which calls for “science-based educational research, and its close cousin, evidence-based practice” (Schwandt 2005: 285). These approaches are justified due to their adherence to quantifiable and replicable principles and methods, which consider other ways of carrying out research as less valid, assigning them to the margins. Furthermore, neo-liberal ideology which has influenced political decision making for nearly half a century, and the mechanistic principles of Newtonian science are closely linked,

....in an alliance which denies the importance of inner lives and is proving intransigent to challenge. Yet the limitations of this Newtonian worldview are damaging the health and life chances of an increasing number of people, as it fails to address the emotional, economic and educational consequences of those who are unable to successfully compete in such a neoliberal landscape.  
(Walton and Darkes-Sutcliffe, 2023:2)

The political nature of neo-liberal ideology has produced a vision of education which is defined by ‘scientism’, and the intertwining relationship between neoliberalism and scientism contributes to an entrenched mechanistic view of the world, built on the principles of separation, determinism and reductionism (ibid: 5). In consequence, this has meant that education, rather than providing opportunities to shine a light on understanding and critically analyse what is happening in society, has become a political tool transmitting and reinforcing the scientific neoliberal narrative, in which western society has become increasingly immersed (Walton, 2018).

In an unpublished paper Walton (2018), draws on the work of Daza (2013: 604) who uses the term ‘neoliberal scientism’ to mean:

The uneven, albeit worldwide convergence of the discourses of business and pre-Kuhnian views of science, reconfiguring complex ecological and social challenges as

apolitical (and often economic) problems in need of technical (non-ideological) solutions.

Daza, (quoted in Walton 2018:10) suggests that policies and practices, produced by a government committed to the neoliberal principles of individualism and market forces, are presented as ‘the natural, neutral, non-ideological, apolitical, objective, or common-sense alternative to other choices.’ She argues that the depoliticization intrinsic to neoliberal scientism, establishes a false choice between thinking that is deemed as objective and value-free, and thinking that does not fit in with the ‘scientific’ principles of neoliberalism, can be dismissed as ideological and inefficient. This has resulted in a situation where:

Neoliberal scientism systematically neutralises the capacity to critique it by managing and delegitimizing resistance...how can education develop a critical consciousness about ideologies that broadly frame it when its imaginary is always already shaped by those enclosures? ...generally, educators have only a vague idea (or no idea) of what neoliberalism is. By some accounts, educators themselves are fuelling the turn to neoliberal scientism, which has resulted in the erosion of their own public institutions.

(Daza, 2013:607-608)

The neutralising capacity of neoliberal scientism is evident for example, in the unquestioning way ‘target setting’ and a standards agenda is used and applied across schools and early years settings. It has become taken for granted that children should be assessed and tested so that their ‘results’ can be measured against developmental norms and a narrow conception of progress can be accounted for. Dahlberg and Moss (2005) suggest that scientific knowledge is used to provide a basis for achieving order because in such a system:

It claims to guarantee prescribed outcomes, ensuring we get what we expect. We know the adult we want the child to become, we know the world in which that adult must live and work. The challenge is to produce the adult to fit that world, in the most cost-effective way – and with the help of scientific knowledge-as-regulation the challenge can be met.

(Dahlberg and Moss, 2005:6)

The system and processes that sustain our educational structures allow little room for such presumptions to be questioned or critiqued, resulting in the constriction of democratic

pedagogical alternatives and in the words of Daza above, “the erosion” of our “own public institutions”.

### 6.5.3 Childhood, School-Readiness and Human Capital Theory

After undergoing several revisions, the current ‘EYFS’ Statutory framework (DfE, 2021) highlights in the introduction how it ‘sets the standards’ all providers should meet:

It promotes teaching and learning to ensure children’s ‘school readiness’ and gives children the broad range of knowledge and skills that provide the right foundation for good future progress through school and life.

(DfE, 2021:2).

There has been a noticeable shift here from earlier versions of the EYFS Framework to focus on ‘school readiness’ and ‘future progress through school *and life*’. This reflects the government’s belief in early years as a ‘social investment’ strategy, in which human capital theory provides an economic argument for investing in early years services for young children. The UK government believes that “the 21<sup>st</sup> century will belong to those countries that win the global race for jobs and economic advantage” and that adults “need to be properly equipped with essential skills from the very beginning of their lives” (Truss, 2013). Such an alignment of education with human capital theory means that neo-liberal imperatives are exerting a significant influence in policy agendas, not only with regard to raising standards and improving pupil attainment, but also in relation to how children and childhood is viewed.

Under human capital theory, children are valued on the basis of what they will become- educated and economically active adults. Childhood therefore becomes a path to adulthood rather than an important stage in its own right.

(Campbell-Barr and Leeson, 2016:22)

Neo-liberal imagery sees the child as a ‘poor child’, not valued for what they are now, but what they will become. The shift in the wording of the principles of the most recent EYFS Framework (DfE, 2021) reflects this. No longer the idea of the ‘rich’ child, a powerful learner who is strong

and resilient. The emphasis on school readiness means the focus is not on ‘being’ but ‘becoming’ (ready for school). What the child must learn has been pre-determined and monitored by targets to be attained. Co-constructing learning with children is undermined and the emphasis is on that which is external and measurable.

Currently, the Government’s vision for schools and early years settings can be seen in the Schools White Paper *‘Opportunity for all: Strong schools with great teachers for your child’* (DfE 2022). It outlines structural reforms by developing regulation plans and expanding the reach of multi-academy trusts. The emphasis is placed solely on academic achievement, focusing on expected standards in reading, writing and mathematics. A ‘Parents Pledge’ that “Any child that falls behind in English or Maths should receive timely and evidence-based support” (ibid:37), and where ‘great teaching’ means informing parents of their child’s progress and telling them what they should do at home to support the school’s interventions. The image of parents is primarily one of consumer, where parents are simultaneously positioned as the child’s most enduring educator, whilst at the same time maintaining a deficit model of parenting in relation to the parents’ priorities, and background (Sims-Schouten, 2016). Parents’ funds of knowledge about their child, are not valued. The emphasis on co-constructing understandings together, becoming lost. The image of the early years practitioner is also a deficit one, which in policy discourse, is focused on lack of qualifications and practitioners who are ‘in need of transformation’ (Allen 2011; Osgood 2012). They are not valued for the depth of knowledge, understanding and expertise they bring. In current policy, the priority for ECEC

..... is placed on a school readiness agenda which fails to acknowledge the essential need to ensure emotional well-being, security and stability as a basis for all learning. There is no sense, either implicit or explicit, of a relational and mutually respecting dynamic between educator, parent and child.

(Walton and Darkes-Sutcliffe, 2023: 21)

In this chapter, I have explained how I was struggling to find a way forward for the CI and how much pressure I was under to secure measurable evidence for the project which would ‘prove’ quality improvements. This led to an examination of the socio-historical and socio-political

influences on the context for the inquiry, interrogating and challenging current understandings of what constitutes 'quality early years provision'. I developed my argument to offer a critique and analysis of neoliberalism showing how the ideas and thinking from its particular perspective and worldview has had considerable influence on practice in ECEC. Locating my experience within this framing, I offered an explanation of why I felt so powerless in my work role, being unable to see at that time, how my insecurities stemmed from a neo-liberal ideology, adherence to which was restricting the choices that could be made. The next chapter, describes the second phase of the action research, explaining how an unexpected new opportunity arose which enabled me to develop what I came to understand as an alternative narrative, opening up new ways of thinking, seeing and doing.

Because if we can shake ourselves free of a 'regime of truth', a dominant discourse, which insists there is only one way to think, see and do, we are open to other discourses, alternative stories, new ways of thinking, seeing and doing.

(Moss, 2019: 98)

## **Chapter Seven**

### **Action Research: Phase 3**

“Last week watching my team with the inspector was unbelievable. I was so proud that they were able to speak confidently and explain the rationale behind everything they do and the difference that makes to the children who use [our setting]. It is a new way of working that not everyone understands but it works!”

Chloe (Nursery Owner and Manager February 2015)

This chapter details the third phase of the Action Research which was much larger in scale. It identifies the impact of my influence in setting up a new project across the City for early years practitioners working with 2 year- olds, and how collaborative working practices enabled learning with and from each other, so that new thinking and knowledge was created. This chapter links leadership work with the quality improvement agenda, highlighting how those engaging in practitioner- led inquiry became leaders of their own practice. By using narrative accounts and photographs, I will demonstrate how practitioners began to articulate their own theories of practice and show some examples of the changes to practice and provision that took place. I examine how central are reflective and reflexive thought to practitioner- led inquiry, arguing that programmes designed to support professional development need to take account of the challenges schools and settings face in terms of limited resources and time for reflection.

## 7.1. Embracing the Struggle

During this phase of my research, there was much concern within the team about our future. Two from my team of quality improvement officers, had left to find posts elsewhere. Despite this, as explained in chapter 6, my reflections on what had occurred in the Collaborative Inquiry (CI), gave me a sense of hope and encouraged me to see that I was not powerless and that there were other possibilities. As highlighted in the previous chapter, the effect of neo-liberal ideology on the 'quality improvement' agenda and on role I had to assume at work, was challenging for me, but rather than adopt a 'politics of refusal' which includes a rejection of the 'categories and norms which seek to represent us' (Ball 2016:13), I continued to try and find a way to explore ways forward that would enable me to advocate for the practitioners and collaborative ways of working.

All those on whom power is exercised to their detriment, all who find it intolerable, can begin the struggle on their own terrain and on the basis of their proper activity (or passivity).

(Deleuze and Foucault, 1977:216)

I decided that I had to embrace the “struggle” and show courage, starting by being honest about my thoughts and perspective with my line manager Paula. I decided to instigate discussion with her by sharing the research framework that I had been using to research my own practice. In advance of my performance review meeting, I sent this to her in an effort to explain and make sense of the Collaborative Inquiry in my work as QIO EYFS. This can be seen in \*\* Appendix Four and was the first section of my research proforma.

I wanted Paula to understand what motivated me and the values that underpinned my work; wishing her to recognise the impact the CI was still having on those that had taken part. My intention was to highlight how, by adopting an inquiry based approach, this could open up other ways of working with the practitioners; how reflective practitioners and collaborative learning are essential to the process of developing inclusive approaches, and how practitioners need time and space to develop their thinking and to learn from each other. I wanted to explain my belief that monitoring and self- evaluation should be a distributed process involving all practitioners, that it should be inquiry-based and inform CPD as a continuing journey, a process, not a series of isolated events.

At the performance review, Paula said she found reading it “interesting” and although agreeing with some of it, explained that things were changing dramatically in ‘School Improvement’. She informed me that she had found a new job and would be leaving the LA within a few weeks, asking my permission if she could share the document with Sue, Head of Childcare and Sufficiency. Shortly before Paula left, she met with the team to explain that our work would need to focus more on the quality of provision for two year-olds. She requested that I should take the lead on this and establish a ‘network of support’ for practitioners working with two year-olds. I welcomed this challenge and used this opportunity to begin developing a new monthly ‘*Step-up 4 2’s Network*’. Building on the insights gained from the CI, my vision for it was to provide a forum for collaborative working and discussion, through which practitioners and leaders, from both schools and settings, could meet together, share findings and gain support to develop their practice and provision.



## 7.2 Working with Two Year Olds- a new opportunity

From September 2013, Local Authorities were required to make available and fund free ECEC for eligible two year old children. It was a national targeted support programme, which funded provision for two year olds from disadvantaged backgrounds (as determined by the child's eligibility in line with deprivation indices). The Free Early Education Entitlement (FEEE) was for the 20% most disadvantaged two year olds, and in 2014 was extended to include 40% of this group (HMG 2016). The main aims of the FEEE were to:

- Support two year old children's learning and development.
- Support access to childcare for parents who are economically disadvantaged.

(DfE, 2013; DH, 2015.)

By targeting the 'two year old offer' at 'disadvantaged children' to give them the opportunity to attend high quality early years provision, the aim was to support the child's life experience, as well as their future life chances, outside of the home environment. New funding was becoming available to schools and settings who were encouraged to expand their provision to provide additional places for two year old children eligible for funding. However, the initiative was being rolled out during the period of austerity measures and numerous challenges were being faced within the LA. We were aware that across the City, there was a lack of consistency in settings who could provide well for children under three. Using this local knowledge as well as OfSTED inspection data, settings which were not rated as good or above, would not be eligible to offer the FEEE to families or access the related training and support. Although I felt uncomfortable about this (because after all, wasn't it the 'satisfactory' and 'requires improvement' settings that would benefit most from enhanced training and support?) on the other hand, unless children were able to attend good quality provision the potential for narrowing the attainment gap for vulnerable learners and improving outcomes for children would be lost (Mathers et al, 2014a).

### 7.2.1 Stepping-up for Two Year Olds- a strategic approach

As no replacement for Paula had been appointed, I began to work more closely with Sue, the Head of Childcare Information and Sufficiency, and it soon became clear that my role would involve more than just developing a network. Involving high levels of funding, an SLA (Service Level Agreement) was drawn up, between the Local Council and the QIO Team, which outlined the main aims of the service which were to:

- Build capacity to ensure quality provision for 2 year olds in Liverpool.
- Provide information, guidance, training and support for all sectors in receipt of funded 2 year olds.
- Secure improvement in Early Years Foundation Stage measures for children in receipt of funded 2 year old places so that children develop positive dispositions to learning and make good progress in the Prime Areas of Learning and Development of the EYFS.

I was given lead responsibility for this and began 'populating' the SLA by deciding how the allocated funding was to be spent. I liaised with my other team members but had the freedom and autonomy to take this in the direction I wanted. It was an unexpected opportunity that came at a time when I thought that any hope of collaborative working was lost. The SLA was a large and detailed document that outlined the work of the team with regards to developing quality of provision for two year-olds. It included a *Performance Management Framework* which outlined the areas that would be monitored and evaluated, an outline of which can be seen below:



***Figure 6 Aspects of the Performance Management Framework***

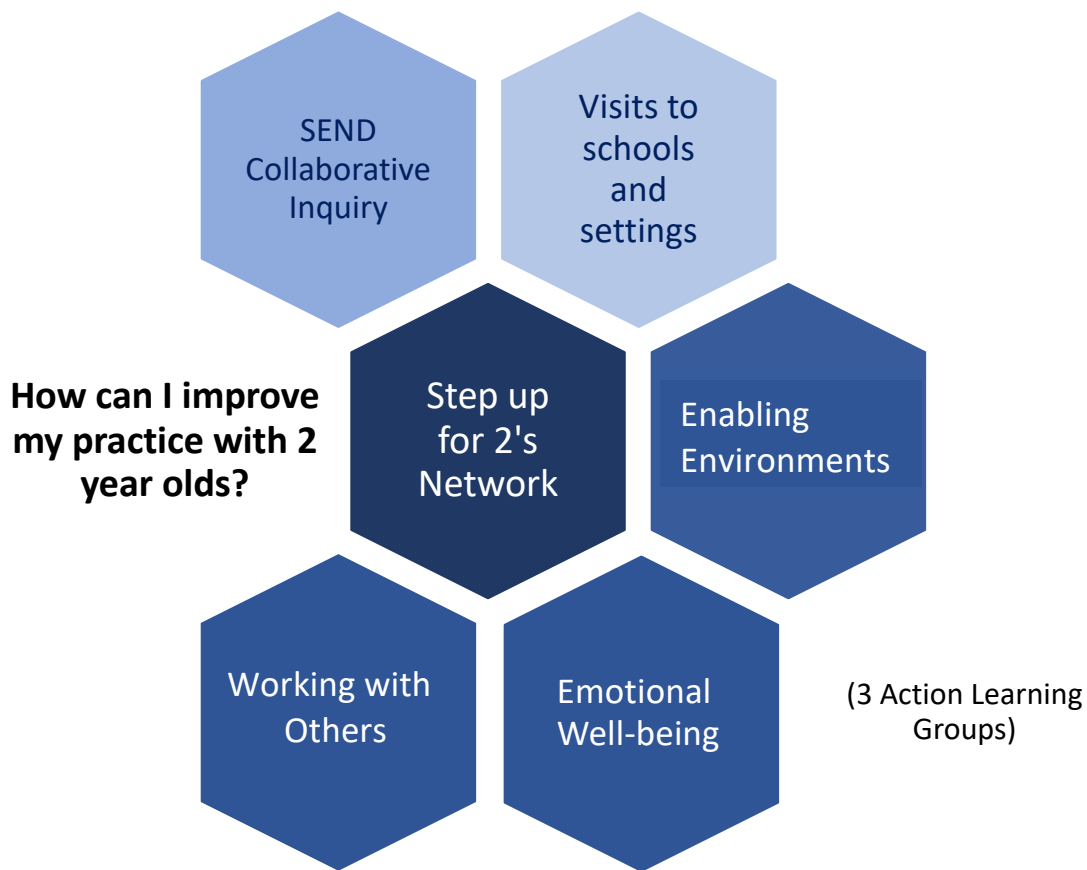
Working within this framework meant thinking very carefully about the different aspects of the project, especially the ‘results to be achieved’ and ‘outcomes’ sections. It was difficult to predict what these would be exactly, but together with my colleagues in the team, we were able to identify outcomes that were open-ended enough for monitoring purposes, but did not rely on spurious assessment based data for two year olds. For example:

- Practitioners more aware of what they can do to effect change.
- Practitioners increase their awareness of how they can use their influence to improve practice.
- Action reflection and evaluation cycle understood, and changes implemented in a continuous cycle of quality improvement.
- Provision and practice for two year olds and their families is improved.

Quarterly monitoring reports regarding the progress of the work had to be submitted and the finances were audited regularly. However, I also had the freedom to plan and create new ways of working with practitioners across the maintained and PVI sector.

Called ‘*Stepping-up for Two Year Olds*’, the project focused on providing support and training for leaders and practitioners working with this particular age group. It had many aspects, including information and advice for those establishing new provision in schools that had never

taken children under three before. The meta- theme was an inquiry question- *'How can I improve my practice for two year olds?'* However, the central strand of the project, which forms the third phase of my research inquiry, involved setting up three Action Learning groups and establishing a new Collaborative Inquiry group to improve practice with SENCOs.



**Figure 7 Main strands of the 'Stepping- up for Twos' Project**

Setting up such a large project meant I had to work strategically, involving and working closely with many others in order to fulfil the aims of the project. This started with briefing the other members of my team and sharing my vision for the project, encouraging them to contribute ideas for the development of the programme. We gathered data about which schools were

preparing to take two year olds for the first time, and each of us was allocated a certain number of settings and schools which were extending their provision. This involved meeting the head teacher or setting manager and carrying out visits to support the early years lead and the practitioners working in the 'two's room'. Each QIO had dedicated time to offer individualised support and advice in context. The team also signposted the staff to the support and 'training' that was available to them through the *'Stepping-up for Two Year Olds'* project.

### 7.3 Not Training, but Action Learning: Significance of I >< We

As explained in the introduction to this thesis, it is my belief that training should reflect more than a passive role for practitioners as consumers of knowledge, but which include the role of the practitioner as an active agent in creating knowledge for the improvement of teaching and learning (Pine, 2009). Just as in the Collaborative Inquiry, professional development using an action research approach, offered a model of learning which supported practitioner-led inquiry to explore new ways of doing things, where the emphasis was on practice rather than instruction (McNiff, 2002).

The aim was for those involved to be actively engaged in their learning, questioning, challenging and debating the implications of theory for their practice and provision. Interested practitioners were invited to develop a small scale action learning project, focusing on an area of practice or provision they wanted to identify as a priority for improvement in their own setting.

Attendance at an 'action learning cluster group', would provide a forum for shared learning and action. A 'research framework' was introduced and given to the participants, to guide them in their inquiry, this can be seen in Appendix One, **\*\*Researching Own Practice Framework**. The practitioners were encouraged to capture their thoughts in a journal as the project moved forward, and this, along with notes and photographic/video observations, would help them to gather information about their research stories as part of a process of action/reflection and evaluation.

More significantly was the process that would enable this to happen. Drawing upon the

understandings gained from the initial CI, I wanted the practitioners to be open to learning the skills and understandings they needed as well as to have the confidence to participate and feel valued. My hope was that the 'Step up for 2's' project would provide the means that would:

Replace the traditional reliance on power and control with a new emphasis on learning and exploration. This process is not about learning a set of fixed answers.... but learning as a continuous process of coming to know.

(Whitaker, 1997:145)

Adopting the route of "personal inquiry" shifts the balance of power from the facilitator (the expert) deciding what should be focused on, to the practitioners themselves identifying an area of focus. Just as had happened in the CI, by engaging in critical thinking in collaboration with others, the practitioners would come to recognise that they and their team members already have a vast store of insight and experiences which they could and should be using. My thoughts about this had been influenced by Patrick Whitaker, an inspirational tutor and educationalist that I came to know during my MA. Drawing from insights from the field of psychotherapy, Whitaker suggests that it is through more "sensitive and caring relationships" adopting leadership behaviours that are more "life- centred", that approaches can be developed that question the systems and structures "that limit and restrain people". These influences include not just external factors but internal processes too, and "these patterns can be questioned in ways that encourage personal and professional change" (Whitaker 1997:45). So that, as Rowan (1992) argues, self-images that have been crushed can be re-created by attention to inner thoughts and feelings. In this way subjectivity becomes a "rich realm" for discovery:

...the rich realm of subjectivity that was pushed down as too dangerous and too weak is now opened up and entered into and allowed to exist and be used and transformed. There is a feeling of being real instead of unreal.

(Rowan, 1992:63)

Control becomes transformed into a process of co-creation "where we genuinely take responsibility for our world." (ibid). Furthermore, by including teachers in schools alongside practitioners in PVI settings, there was also an opportunity for 'redressing the balance' whereby those in schools who previously worked only with children 3 years old and above, could meet,

listen to and learn from those who were experienced in meeting the needs of under threes. This vision was a bold one. The fact that this project was so much larger than the CI had been, meant that I had to be strategic as well as pragmatic in my approach. It would not be possible to re-create the CI, but I was determined to use the understandings I had gained by working in a collaborative way, to influence how *'Stepping-up for 2's'* would be organised and delivered. Personally, I would be unable to be directly involved with all the 'action learning clusters' so I needed to involve other facilitators who shared my values and who were experienced in working with the wide range of practitioners across ECEC.

I was also wary of calling the group 'Action Research' cluster groups. Claiming that each participant would be undertaking action research would involve a level of adhering to a methodology that may not be possible to be true to. For example, the practitioners involved were working full-time in early years settings, and whilst it would be possible for them to research their own practice with the aim of improving it, it would be more difficult for them to access and research the relevant literature. Therefore, there needed to be a flexibility that allowed an 'action research approach', one that involved cycles of action/reflection /evaluation, but which also had scope to guide the practitioners in their inquiry by introducing (or re-visiting) educational theory and facilitate challenge to encourage the participants to engage in critical reflection.

There is no one definition of action learning that is universally accepted but I was drawn to Zuber-Skerritt's (2002:114) definition of the concept which he puts simply as " Learning from concrete experience and critical reflection on that experience- through group discussion, trial and error, discovery, and learning from and with each other". Furthermore, his understanding reflects my own beliefs about knowledge and learning that I explained earlier in this thesis, whereby:

Learners at any level can acquire knowledge- and produce it- through their own active search and research.... Action learning recognizes the possibility for learners to generate knowledge rather than merely absorbing passively the results of research produced by specialists. (ibid :115)

It was my intention that the action learning clusters would provide a space for this to happen, the creation of which drew upon the concept of ‘communities of practice’ (Wenger 1998) where those involved would have the opportunity for social interaction and engagement, feeling connected to one another within a supportive learning environment. This would enable individuals to share challenges and discuss possible solutions, stimulating learning and collaborative working in order to improve practice. Developing communities of practice involves “an active process of collective meaning making” through which “reflection takes every person into a leadership space to some extent” (Paige-Smith and Craft, 2008:175). Whilst this was a laudable aim, I was aware that it would not necessarily occur automatically and that:

.... if inter-professional working is to be built around a communities of practice model, then the findings point to the importance of a leading facilitator and appropriate managerial support to influence interaction processes.

(Simpson, 2011:713)

Those who facilitated the action learning clusters would have to work in a sensitive and responsive way, one that encouraged, respected and valued the contributions of the practitioners. This would require skill and understanding in order to provide the correct level of support to influence the interaction processes and opportunities for the participants to grow professionally and personally. It was not difficult to identify the three people that I wanted to invite as facilitators. I had worked with each of them before, and highly respected their writing and their approach to working with practitioners. Each of them was an ‘expert’ but realised the importance of resisting the expert/transmission model. All of us had a shared belief in experiential learning and the benefits of using action research approaches as a means to instigate change. Before setting up the project I met with each of them to explain my vision for the project and asked if they would commit to working in such a way. Although I would be unable to attend each and every cluster meeting, I would be working closely with them to oversee the planning and gather feedback from them about the work of their cluster.



Each Action Learning Cluster would focus on a particular aspect of working with two year olds. The Practitioners themselves would select which cluster they wished to be part of and between 16 to 20 participants attended each of the groups.

**Figure 8:** Showing Key Focus of Each Action Learning Cluster



**Figure 8 Showing Key Focus of Each Action Learning Cluster**

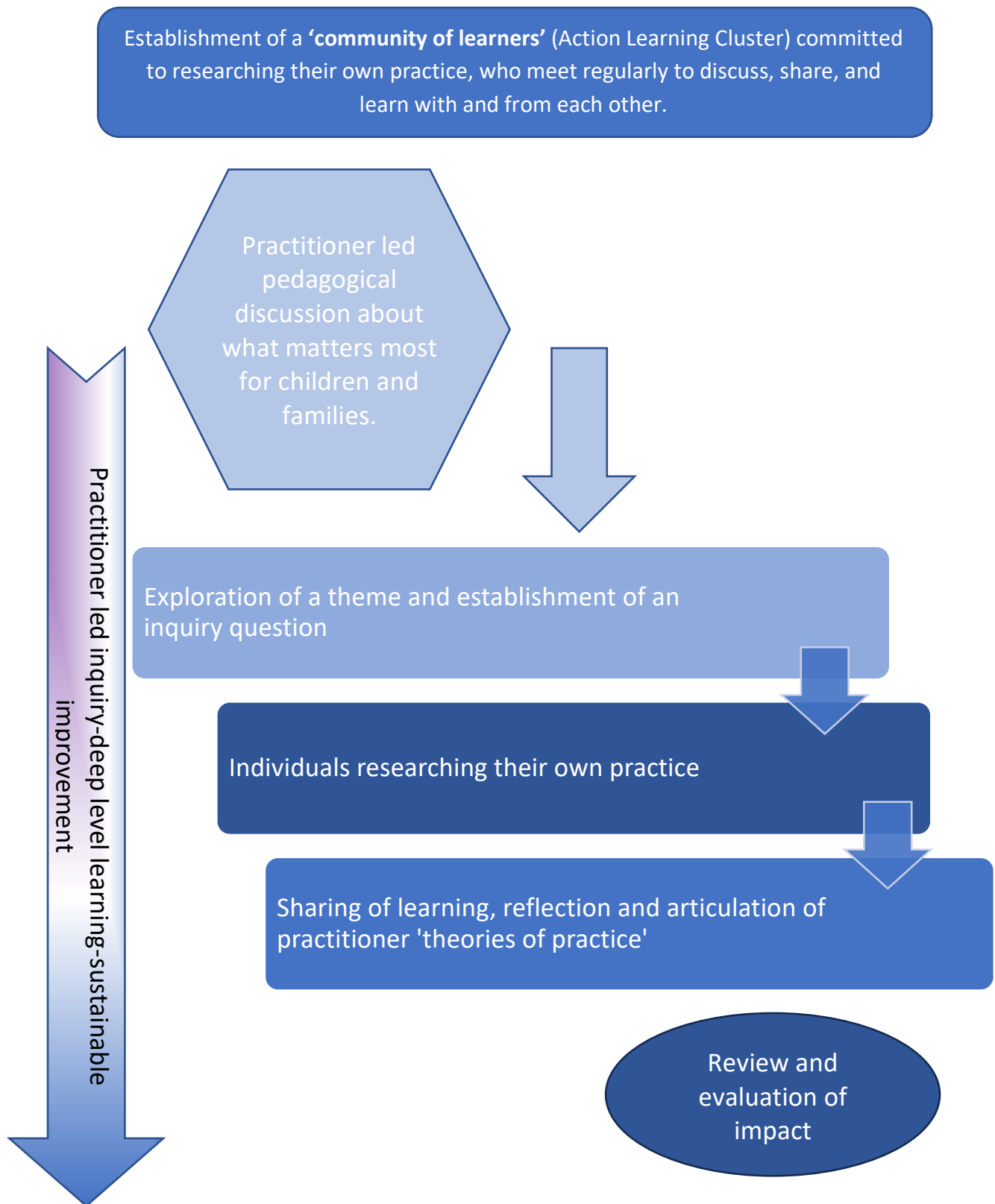
The clusters met monthly between October and March where the participants were introduced to new learning and educational theories and supported to research their own practice through adopting practitioner-led inquiry. In the groups, they created and shared their own inquiry question concerning an aspect of their practice they wished to look into more deeply. Such practitioner led inquiry involved the participants in individually researching their practice in their setting and then at the next session, sharing their 'research story' with others back in the action learning cluster.

Of importance also, were the values that underpinned the work that was done. These were agreed, adhered to and practised, namely collaboration, trust and openness, with mutual respect and tolerance of mistakes as a means of learning (Zuber-Skerritt, 2002). It was significant that although those involved came from different schools and settings, the feedback about the discussions in the clusters, highlighted how the whole cohort shared the same core values that informed the ways that they worked with the children and families- understandings and theoretical perspectives that support holistic approaches to child development and learning that see children as unique, active, independent and powerful learners (Basford, 2019).

#### 7.4 Practitioner- led inquiry: asking questions that matter.

Fostering a spirit of inquiry in the cluster groups, through asking questions in the search for answers, the practitioners were supported to engage in practitioner- led inquiry, opening up their thinking to explore potentials and possibilities in their work. Just as in the CI, the process started with them, together exploring what motivated them, what they were passionate about and then moving on to explore a theme. They were encouraged to adopt a 'research stance' back in the setting, involving being curious and open to the views of others, reflecting on their work and questioning 'the taken for granted' (Arnold, 2012). Through the use of open ended questions such as "I wonder if..." or "How can I ...", the participants began to identify an inquiry question that they could explore. The phrase "I wonder if" held most appeal for the practitioners. It was non-threatening and provided a basis for 'possibility thinking' (Craft 2010) By working together in purposeful investigation, they started to generate and test new knowledge. In this way individuals began to create and articulate their own theories of practice in collaboration with others.

The following diagram illustrates the project process:



*Figure 9 Project Process*

Coming together and sharing the account of their research story with others, enables those involved to celebrate their learning together, creating a context for dialogue and meaning making in which all participants can learn as equals, as practitioners articulate their 'theories of practice'. When their enquiry is shared with others either at the cluster or because of collaborative working within their nursery, the question may change and become a vehicle for new enquiries, providing a means for new learning (McNiff, 2002).

Practitioner-led inquiry, as the name suggests, is personal to the one who is embarking on their inquiry and starts with them as an individual. There are numerous accounts from the participants that I could draw upon to demonstrate the learning that was taking place and the new knowledge that was created, which had an impact not only on the individual participant, but on the provision and practice within the setting. To illustrate how this approach was used and developed I will use 3 examples, one from each of the clusters.

## 7.5 Cluster One- Enabling Environments

Attending this cluster was Chloe, an experienced and a very committed practitioner who was the owner-manager of a day care setting situated in the city centre. She wanted to ensure her setting was resourced and arranged in ways that were suitable for the increased number of two year olds who were attending. She began researching her practice at individual and setting level. After the first cluster meeting, Chloe's initial inquiry question was quite broad *"I wonder if... we all worked together, could we improve our learning environment for the children and families?"*.

She wanted to involve all the staff team, and working in a relational way, to empower all of the nursery team to take charge of change. She arranged to go along to the 'Enabling Environments' cluster, accompanied by Alisa, a new practitioner who worked in the 2 year old's room. Back in the setting, she met with the staff, and they shared what they had learned from the session. She encouraged them all to work together, not just those working with the two year olds, stimulating discussion about what they were proud of in their rooms and to reflect

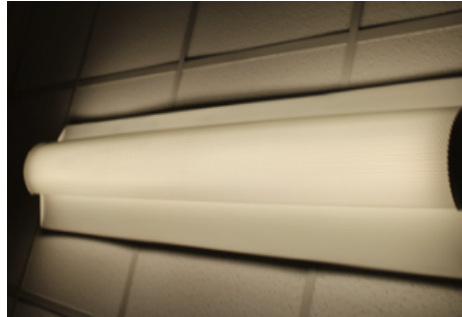
upon what they thought could be improved. Chloe also enrolled another 2 staff members onto the other Action Learning groups, so that they too could bring their ideas and learning back to the setting. Inspired by what she had been learning in Cluster One, Chloe started by involving them all in considering what the environment felt like to the babies, toddlers and the 3 and 4 year olds they worked with. The practitioners had to try and experience this for themselves, by for example, sitting or lying on the carpet- what could they see? How does it feel? Is there a draft? What does it smell like? Does it feel homely and comfortable etc? By using all their senses, the staff began to highlight some of the (sometimes unexpected) issues that confronted them.

*After each session we take away some questions which prompted us to question and observe back in our setting with the whole staff team. Key to this approach was observation- what were the children showing us by their behaviour?*

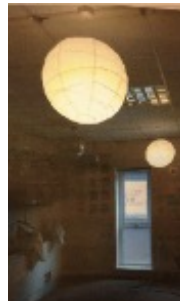
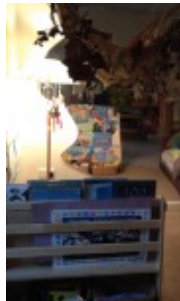
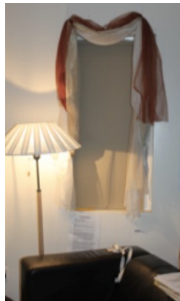
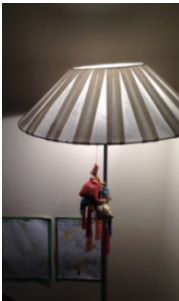
*One of the first things we did was to develop an area in the staff room which would encourage reflection and prompt staff to ask their own questions about their practice. We did this by implementing an "I wonder if?" board. We used this to ensure that the whole team were working together and that all were involved in exploring questions that mattered to them.*

**Chloe: Journal Entry November 2013**

*I wonder if changing the lighting would have an impact on children's learning?*



"One of the first things that we noticed was that the lighting in the setting was often harsh. We were horrified to realise that the bright LED light above the baby's changing table, caused the staff to screw up their eyes!"



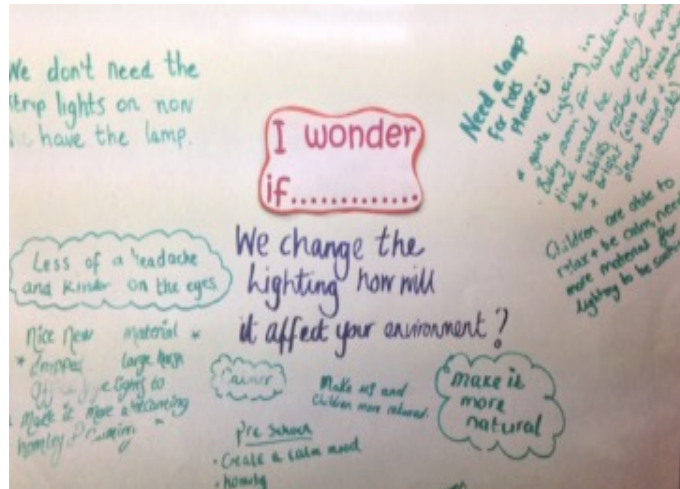
"We discussed what kind of lighting would be better for each room and introduced a range of more 'natural' lights, like the kind children had at home. Immediately the setting had a different, more calming feel and it made such a difference for both the staff and children. Parents were amazed at the change too!"

We introduced  
lighting at different  
levels

*Research suggests that natural light calms children more effectively and we found that it did make a big difference.*

Chloe placed an “I wonder if...” whiteboard was in the staff room to capture the thoughts and comments of the team.

- △ We don't need the strip lights anymore, now that we have the lamps.
- △ Creates a clam and homely feeling
- △ Children are able to relax and be calm, but we need more material for lighting to be soothing
- △ I think that it is having an effect on children's learning, they are concentrating more and seem more engaged.
- △ Parents are saying that it feels more spacious



Chloe kept a journal of her thoughts, which detailed some of the changes that were occurring:

*Changing the lighting got us started. But it wasn't just about the lighting, we as a staff were on a journey now, curious about what else we could change, but also more observant. I liked the "I wonder if..." idea, it sort of gave us all permission to think outside the box, be creative in what we suggested, and I noticed that even the more quiet members of the team were beginning to feel confident about sharing their ideas.*

**Chloe: Journal entry December 2013**

The two other members of the team also contributed the learning from their clusters and through dialogue, reflection and action, a collaborative based approach began to develop. The inquiry question evolved and changed as the emphasis shifted to working with parents. Are we truly working in partnership? How well do we listen to the parents, how well do we know them, how could we improve our practice?

*We began to think about what the nursery felt like for parents, starting with the physical environment, how welcoming is it? How does a parent feel when they walk in the door? We noticed that the entrances to the setting were often cluttered with prams and unloved property, so we set about changing this.*

**Chloe: Journal entry January 2014**



“We decluttered the spaces and placed objects of interest in them so that parents and children would have the opportunity to play and talk with their child.”



“We wondered if by introducing interesting and unusual objects in the entrances, whether this would promote language and communication, and critical thinking?”







“We wondered what would happen if we put musical instruments in a corner of the corridor. Would it encourage parents to talk about them with their children, would they play on them together?”

*So excited today, it's started! At first nobody touched the guitar because I think it was perceived as being don't touch it, you might break it. But our hope was that by providing objects of interest it would give parents a permission to linger, a reason to stay. Then this afternoon, one Dad started sharing stuff we didn't know about. He told us he could play the guitar and then picked it up and started playing a tune. He was just outside the office, and we all came out, amazed. He told us he had a stutter and had dyslexia and had experienced a bad time at school but could strum along, and that he went to open mike sessions. The guitar provided a way for him to open up about his experiences, and gave him a reason to stay and share, I really think it has helped develop a sense of trust and of partnership.*

**Chloe: Journal entry February 2014**

Different aspects of enhancing the ‘enabling environment’ were considered and links were made to the learning from the other clusters. An example of an extended cycle of action and reflection happened when Lizzy, (the SENCO) who was attending cluster 3 (Working with Others), began to consider how she could work more closely with parents. Lydia was 30 months old and although seemingly settled, was quiet at nursery. She would join in with activities and talked at home but would not speak to any adults whilst in the setting. Lizzy was also Lydia’s key person and wanted to know what she could do to support her. She knew the family well and worked with them to co-construct a play plan. The speech and language therapist had suggested the use of ‘sabotage’, which is a strategy in which the adult does things incorrectly on purpose or creates silly situations to get a reaction from the child (Stahl & Feigenson 2015).

Lydia's mother, however, was upset about such an approach and felt that all it would do was sabotage her daughter's psychological safety. So instead, together they planned that Lizzy would accompany the family each week on a visit to the park. On these visits, Lizzy was able to play with Lydia, and during their time there, Lydia started to become more confident around Lizzy and began to talk to her. However, on returning to nursery, Lydia became quiet again and this made Lizzy wonder if this had something to do with not only being outside, but also seeing Lizzy in her own clothes (at this time all the staff wore uniform). In the cluster session, Lizzy shared this story, and the group began discussing uniforms. The majority of practitioners working in PVI settings wore uniforms, but those working in schools and maintained Nurseries did not. This prompted discussion back in the Nursery.

No one had thought to question the wearing of uniform before. This was an example of a taken for granted assumption, a way of doing things that was accepted as 'just what happens'. Now the setting was starting to explore why this was so. Teachers wore their own clothes to work, but nursery staff did not; some staff in other settings, even wore 'nurse-style' uniforms. Chloe was also prompted to think more deeply about this and felt that this was problematic as it indicated to her that it supported and sustained the hierarchal division that existed between education and care. However, Lizzy's concern was about Lydia, and she wondered whether dispensing with her uniform and wearing her own clothes in the setting, would help her to settle and feel more secure in the nursery. So, this became the Nursery's next inquiry question:

***We wondered if .... our uniforms were a barrier from truly engaging with our children and families?***

We asked was our uniform a barrier to children and if we removed the uniform would it make children feel more at home?..... From tomorrow we are going to be trying this out. This is part of our emphasis on family and the learning environment. I'm going to bed a little apprehensive tonight as I'm sure the rest of the staff are but if this supports even just one child to feel happier and more assured

"We discussed this as a team, gathering thoughts and ideas. We shared what we were doing with parents and used social media suggestion boxes and old-fashioned discussions with our families to gather their thoughts about us no longer wearing uniform."

Photographs from  
Foyer 'Floorbook'



This inquiry question proved to be one of the most challenging cycles of action and reflection the setting had faced. The suggestion that the Nursery would dispense with uniforms prompted a wide range of reaction from both staff and parents. Chloe put together a 'Floorbook' to capture what was happening and this was put on display in the foyer for all to see. It documented the discussions and thoughts of the practitioners from the '*I wonder if...*' board as

well as the results from a survey that had been sent out to all families. They also gathered parents' thoughts from posts on the Nursery Facebook page and included copies of the written comments parents had made.

Of greatest concern was that one staff member, Sandra, initially said that if the uniform was taken away from her, she was going to leave. There were many involved discussions at the staff meeting about what it would mean for them and the reasons for and against not having a uniform. Chloe also discussed this with Elizabeth Jarman and I, asking us what we thought. We both had much admiration for Chloe and what she was doing; it was not easy, she was grappling with a difficult issue, one that was stirring up a range of opinions and some very emotional responses. Like Chloe, I had also noticed the differences in clothing between practitioners working in PVI settings and those in schools but was not aware however, that this issue had ever been researched or written about in the literature. I was also interested in what had prompted her to start thinking about this now, as I knew that often in action research when undertaking deep reflection, 'tricky issues' would surface because what was previously invisible became visible (Brookfield, 1995). I listened to Chloe and reassured her, advising her to continue working collaboratively with the team as she was doing, and 'trust the process', taking time to pursue the inquiry question with others. The issue was eventually resolved, and everyone involved, including Sandra, understood why, and agreed that Nursery staff would no longer wear uniform. This was such a bold step to take, and as Chloe explained, not just done to be different or controversial, but out of a desire to be recognised as early years educators and valued as such.

*The project has involved taking risks and trying out things we had not done before. For example, the decision to move away from a 'corporate' image by wondering what the impact would be if staff no longer wore a uniform to work, initially met with resistance from some families, whilst others welcomed the initiative. We worked through the challenges, consulting with and listening to the parents and their concerns. We documented the process for our parents to share and by involving them in this way, the decision was made to implement a less formal dress code. This was achieved because all understood the rationale for this which was to make the setting more welcoming for children and create a more family friendly ethos.*

**Chloe: Reflections for Conference March 2015**

Even after the Action Learning Clusters for the “*Step up for 2’s*” project had come to an end, the setting has continued to use practitioner led inquiry and ‘I wonder if...’ as a stimulus in a process of continuous self-evaluation and improvement. Interestingly, they still have the ‘Floorbook’ which captures much about the process of the change to wearing ‘own clothes’. It is no longer an issue, it is just ‘normal’ for them now. It was indeed a ‘transformational’ change for them at the time, which Chloe discussed with me in her reflections 10 years on. (see chapter 8, and also \*\*Transcript of Chloe’s reflections on the ‘Step up for 2’s’ Project. for the full account about the setting’s inquiry into wearing uniform).

*As a team we have been on a journey of improvement which has challenged us to observe and really notice, thinking deeply about what we need to provide for our children and how to ensure our families feel welcome and experience a sense of belonging. Over this time, we have made many changes which we believe are more than just a quick fix or a visual make over.*

*The changes we have made are based on our knowledge and understanding of child development and what this means in practice for us here in this Nursery. We have listened to our parents and used this relationship to research our own practice to respond to their individual needs and their understandings about their children. All the team have been involved and at individual, room and setting level we have developed a shared vision which has allowed everyone to articulate a shared pedagogy.*

*This continuous cycle of reflection has been achieved by observing closely and asking questions of our practice through the development of our “I Wonder?” board. This has allowed us to work collaboratively and seek answers to our questions.*

Chloe: Presentation for Conference March 2015

Recently I contacted each of the facilitators of the cluster groups, to ask them what they remembered about the ‘Step up for 2’s Project’. In relation to cluster one, Elizabeth Jarman recollects that what stood out for her was the creation of the inquiry questions, ones that were personal to the practitioners.

*The project was really powerful on so many levels. Involvement required delegates to formulate their own enquiry based questions. This was a big challenge as not of all those participating were used to doing this in life, never mind in their work context. It was perhaps the first time they had been given permission to own their own learning.*

**Elizabeth Jarman. May 2022**

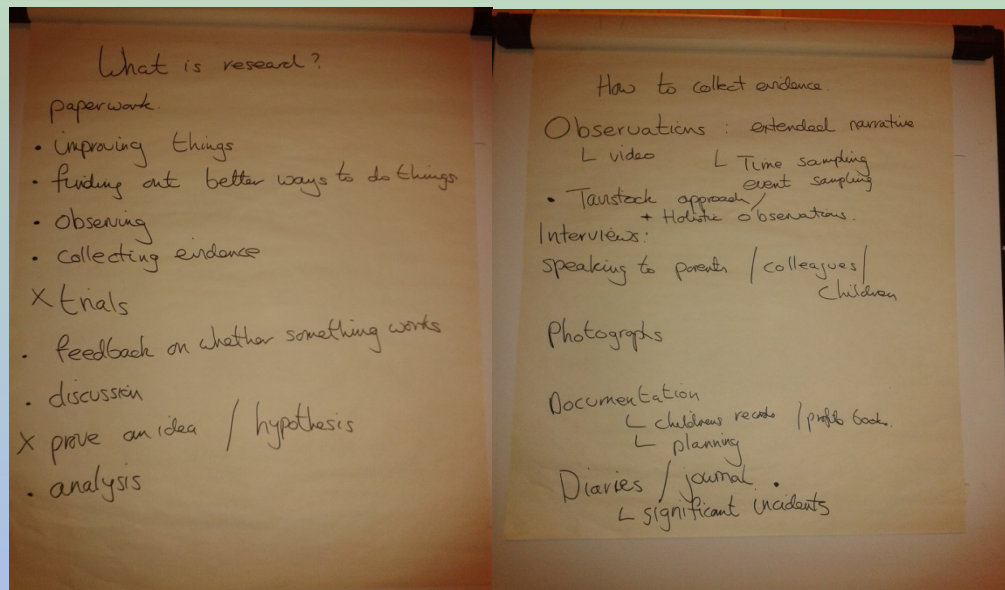
Although acknowledging that formulating their own inquiry based questions was important to the practitioners owning their own learning, I found it significant that Elizabeth also stated that “It was perhaps the first time they had been **given permission**” to do so. Was that what the ‘Step up for 2’s project’ was doing? *Requiring* practitioners to formulate their own inquiry questions, giving them *permission* to own their own learning? This raises ethical and political questions, questions about power and the ownership of knowledge. In chapter 8, I return to answering this in when I discuss how co-constructing knowledge involves creating knowledge in relationship with others.

## 7.6 Cluster Two- Emotional Well-being.

The process and structure of this cluster was a little different from the other clusters. Julia Manning-Morton and Maggie Thorpe had written ‘*Key Times: A framework for developing high quality provision for children under three.*’ (Manning-Morton and Thorpe 2006) and had used and developed the “*Key Times*” project across the UK with many groups of practitioners. Julia argues that “in order to sufficiently meet the needs of very young children and thereby develop quality provision, early years practitioners must develop a professional approach that combines personal awareness with theoretical knowledge.” (Manning Morton, 2006:42) and describes the ‘*Key Times*’ project as “illustration of a process that impacted positively on practitioners’ professional self-worth through valuing self-awareness in relation to the physical and emotional dimensions of practice.” (ibid).

I recognised that 'Key Times' would reflect the process orientated approach of the 'Step up for Two's' project, and so the sessions for Cluster Two, were based upon the 'Key Times' but adapted slightly. As an example, Julia's notes from the initial session, capture something of the discussions of the group (shared with permission). After talking about why the group members had come and what they hoped to get out of the sessions, Julia started with the 'I' and went on to encourage each person to focus on themselves as individuals.

We talked about the Step up for 2s Project and how that was based on the idea of practitioners 'researching' an aspect of their practice or provision. So, we thought about what 'research' meant to us and how evidence can be collected:

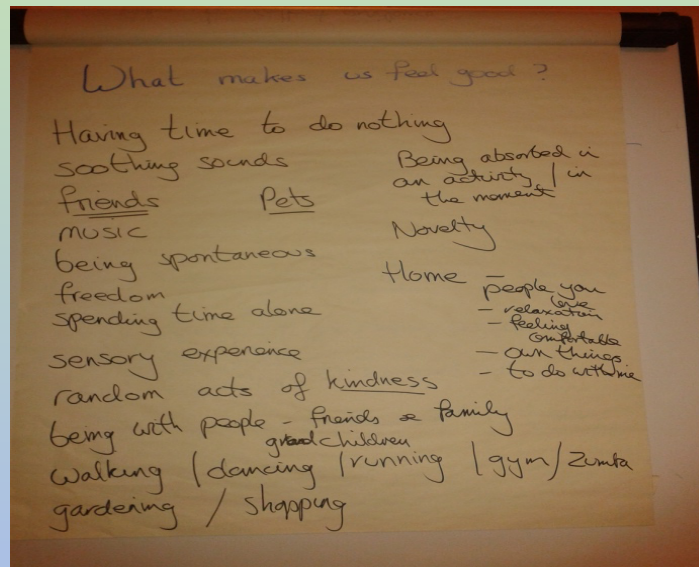


It was interesting to see how Julia used the practitioners' understanding of research to guide them into thinking about how they could research their own practice, by thinking about the ways in which they document the children's learning, how observations are used and how there are many ways of capturing and reflecting upon an observation. In this way possibilities began to open up and practitioners could begin to see that there were other choices, other ways to capture learning. However, the starting point was them, reflecting upon what well-



being meant to them. Julia skilfully scaffolded the learning in this way to encourage discussion and dialogue, moving the practitioners on to consider what well-being means to the children in their settings.

We then spent time thinking about what well-being means to us:



The practitioners were then asked to observe back in the setting and 'notice and note':

- What a 2 year old looks like when experiencing emotional well-being.
- How is the child expressing their emotional well-being?
- What seems to be contributing to that: People? Place? Objects? Activity?

Capturing observations back in the setting and returning to the cluster to share what had been noticed and noted, was one of the main ways that was used to stimulate group discussion throughout the sessions. Many aspects of a two year old's development and were covered and reflected upon over the sessions; new theories introduced which Julia skilfully used to connect to practice with the experiential learning of the participants impacting on provision in the setting with many changes being made. Gina worked in a large primary school and was Assistant Head of the Early Years Unit. She had been a nursery and reception teacher for many



years, but had not worked with two year olds before. Recalling the ‘take away’ task she had been asked to do after the second session, she said:

*Perhaps one of the most unexpected and significant experiences I had [in cluster 2] was when I undertook the observation task. It made me think in a new way about what we were doing with the very youngest children, were we truly aware of the power we had and the impact we were having on them, even in everyday activities?*

Gina: Reflections on project July 2014

The cluster group were focusing on documentation and the use of observations. Everyone was familiar with their use and described how they were carried out in their various settings. There was a shared agreement that good observation skills were important in order to understand children as individuals, noticing carefully what they were learning in order to plan appropriate experiences matched to their need and that when undertaking observations, it was essential to be as *objective* as possible. The group however were to be challenged to undertake another way of observing which required a very different approach.

The ‘Tavistock Infant Observation Method’ was initially created at the Tavistock Clinic in the late 1940s but had been developed and expanded since its original use as a method to train psychotherapists (Waddell, 2006). It is now widely used across many professions and increasingly seen as an effective method for researching young children’s development (Datler, et al 2014; Elfer, 2017). The role of the observer is to be as unobtrusive as possible and immerse themselves in the interactions that take place between the infant and other people present. Unlike the observation methods the participants were familiar with, no notes, photos or videos are to be used by the observer, but a written account of the observation should be made as soon as possible afterwards. This account aims to capture not only what was seen, but significantly what was *felt* by the observer; the emotions, thoughts and feelings that were evoked. Using this approach to observation is an attempt to seek to understand internal emotional states and, as Gina’s ‘Tavistock Observation’ captures, how using this approach helps

the observer to reflect on the emotional aspects of the children's experiences and how this relates to their sense of well-being and learning.

*.... standing back allowed me to observe lots of things that I probably wouldn't have noticed so much before. He was really focused on his play; he was happy collecting the leaves and placing them carefully in a box. He was really enjoying himself and wasn't interested in what the other children were doing. A member of staff was throwing the leaves up and letting the leaves shower down on the other children. She began to involve Robbie, throwing the leaves on to him and trying to get him to join in. I felt quite protective then- why can't she see that he's engrossed, why can't she leave him alone? I felt annoyed that she was interrupting his play.... I watched Robbie going into the house and looking out of the window and chatting to himself even although there were other children around, he seemed happy just pottering about. Then he wandered round the outside of the house looking into it, he seemed anxious. I was worried about what might have happened to him. Robbie then went over to an adult, pointing and complaining it seemed. I started to feel annoyed with the adult because it seemed they did not understand what he was saying and so Robbie went away over to the gate. I felt really sorry for him then and sad too. Robbie looked sad and dejected, he started to open and shut the gate and then another adult came over and explained it needed to be kept open so that nobody got hurt. I felt really frustrated and again annoyed because nobody had been really listening properly to Robbie and it made me worry about how he was feeling.*

**Gina: Extract from 'Tavistock Observation' March 2014**

I attended the cluster meeting when the participants were sharing their observations. It was clear that they had been surprised by the range of emotions experienced by the child and by themselves as observers. Talking to Gina about it later, she explained that she was amazed at the depth of frustration she had experienced watching Robbie but realised afterwards that she would also probably have reacted to him in a similar fashion to the others. For her, the observation had highlighted aspects of the adult-child relationship that she knew could be better. Back in the setting her inquiry question was "*I wonder if we can do more to ensure key person relationships are as good as they can be?*" and working with the staff, encouraged them to reflect on whether they were truly 'tuning in' to children's emotional well-being throughout the day.

*My research has caused me to be reflective. Through discussion with my colleagues our practice has changed. We realise the fundamental role of the Key Person and what that role entails. We are currently working on providing a more homely environment to support smoother transitions and looking at our observation methods. The warmth and attachment displayed by writing a 'Learning Story' is palpable.... It is well-received by parents and gives them the reassurance they need that their child is loved and valued when in our care, as well as showing how their learning and development is moving forward... The practice in our setting is not what it was, but it is embryonic and will continue to evolve as we discover how we can best meet the needs of the little ones in our safekeeping.*

**Gina: Reflections on project July 2014**

It has been almost 9 years since Julia Manning-Morton worked with the cluster, but she recently highlighted the main things about her time in Liverpool that she found noteworthy and began by referring to my role as instigator of the project:

*I think the key issue in relation to the 'Step up for Twos' project, is that you had a level of institutional power (like I did with 'Key Times') which enabled the project to happen and to engage people like me and to run a conference. Your pivotal role was seeing this as important in the first place (and organising the courses I ran previously) and then influencing a process that was collaborative and inclusive - also by engaging people like me who shared those values and principles and creating a devolved structure.*

*In the Emotional Well-being of 2 year olds cluster group, we co-constructed our agenda, used experiential exercises; reflecting on feelings, experiences, and values, did observations; using work group discussion to further understanding and linked theory to practice. We developed indicators of well-being to use. But the biggest outcome for that group was having time to think about the children through observation, about their own values and approach, about their feelings about their work and about their relationships with children and families.*

*I believed this approach was congruent with your own.*

**Julia Manning Morton July 2022.**

## 7.7 Cluster Three- Working with Others

When organising this cluster group, I believed that for a project about the learning and development needs of two year olds, it was important for practitioners to have the skills and understanding needed to support a child with special educational needs and disability. When a child is experiencing difficulties, Early Years Practitioners not only need to know what to look for and how to respond to it, but also to feel confident when interacting with parents, as well as other professionals from a range of services that may also be involved with the child. They also need to be able to develop inclusive practice, so that “the individual needs of all young children are identified and met in the context of interdisciplinary collaboration with other related professionals and with families” (Nutbrown, 2012:19-20). The ‘Working with Others’ cluster appealed mostly to those who were SENCOs. Kay Mathieson facilitated this group and had an exemplary background. She had worked extensively with practitioners in ECEC and is the author of many books and articles about working with children in the early years. Kay was interested in and fully committed to the project’s inquiry based approach and used time after each session responding to the needs of the group through being responsive and flexible when planning for the following meeting. The practitioners explored what is meant by ‘positive relationships’ and went on to investigate how they saw themselves in relationship to the children, parents, colleagues, managers, health professionals and social workers. Many areas for development were identified by the practitioners themselves, and through sharing their accounts, the real life struggles and emotions that were involved when carrying out their role were examined and reflected upon. Kay listened and responded to their concerns; theories about leadership and practitioner well-being were shared and discussed. Furthermore, Kay also modelled how important it was for individuals to be listened to, acknowledged and affirmed, and to be seen as capable, competent, valued and respected. In this way, her approach demonstrated ‘Pedagogical Isomorphism’ (Formosinho and Formosinho, 2007; Oliveira-Formosinho, and Formosinho, 2012 ) as explained in chapter 5, \*\*5.4 Generative Pedagogical Isomorphism.

As the practitioners explored their inquiry question and gathered evidence of their impact and influence in their various contexts, it was remarkable to see how their confidence grew,

particularly when talking about their project with others in the cluster, and also later when sharing their 'research stories' with the audience attending the Conference. Below are two examples from practitioners who explained to me what they had decided to share for their presentations in the Conference workshop session '***Demonstrating and sharing our learning.... Exploring the daily reality of working with 'others'.***

*I'm going to talk about how in the cluster we examined ways we could improve our partnerships with parents to be fully able to understand the Unique child. We discovered that there was no specific right way of engaging with parents because of course, for every Unique child there is at least one Unique parent. I am going to talk about how in our setting we had to think of creative ways to include and involve parents and families and abandon the assumption that what will work for one parent will work for the next. We have one Mum in our nursery who works over 50 hours a week and her work schedule means that week days are very busy for her, so we decided that we needed to schedule weekend times rather than evenings as time was so precious....the fact that Mum worked so hard did not mean she should have any less involvement and input in her son's time at nursery, it just meant we had to work harder to hear her voice. The benefits of her involvement at nursery have far outweighed any inconvenience of arranging weekend get togethers.*

**Emily- SENCO March 2015**

Emily's story shows the level of commitment she has with regard to 'going the extra mile' in order to include and involve parents for the benefit of the child. It also demonstrated the nature of the collaborative approach she was taking with the staff team back in the nursery- "how in our setting we had to think of creative ways to include parents and families". By working with others in the Action Learning cluster, Emily was able to dialogue with others, respectfully listening to other perspectives, sharing and testing out her theory of practice, being curious about whether she could find a means that could accommodate the needs of this particular 'unique parent'; returning to the nursery and sharing her "I wonder if.." question with the nursery team and together, deciding on a course of action.

There were numerous accounts and action plans that were shared in the action learning cluster and at the Conference. Suzy told me about what she was going to share at the Conference, which highlights the power of connection that she felt by experiencing collaborative working.

*I'm going to talk about how as a new SENCO I was worried that I felt so isolated, but by doing the SENCO Award, I have met and made professional links such as with Ruth the speech and language therapist, and with Gloria the education psychologist etc which in the beginning seemed so scary, however now I have the confidence to reach out!! Which in turn will give me support and confidence in making children and parents feel at ease when accessing their professional support!! I'm also going to mention that as well as having the SENCO course where the SENCOs worked as a network team which I'm sure will continue, we now also have consortia .... which also creates another type of network where concerns can be shared, and personal experiences and strategies can be tried and tested. Practitioners are the most resourceful resource and having practitioners who are strong, confident, and dedicated can only have a positive impact on our children.*

**Suzy-SENCO March 2015**

It is clear that Suzy's level of confidence had grown since she had the opportunity to meet and 'network' with other practitioners. Instead of feeling isolated, she finds strength in coming together with others "where concerns can be shared and personal experiences and strategies can be tried and tested", seeing other practitioners as "the most resourceful resource".

Suzy refers to the 'Liverpool Award for Early Years SENCOs', which was an accredited qualification that I developed for Early Years during this time. When the 'Step up for Two Year olds' project began in September 2013, I set up and facilitated a 'Collaborative Inquiry' with a group of PVI managers and SENCOs and a member of the Speech and Language Therapy Team (SLT). Together we explored the question 'How can we provide appropriate support and training for pre-school settings to put the new SEND Code into practice?'. Many of the ideas and thinking behind the 'SENCO Award' came out from the shared discussions that emerged from the SEND Collaborative Inquiry. (More information about this can be seen in \*\*Chapter Nine). What Suzy felt was important for her, was the opportunity to meet with others to

dialogue, sharing ideas, strategies and other perspectives. The idea that providing a forum where practitioners can learn ‘with and from each other’ is a simple but significant one, but one that unfortunately is currently being made less use of.

As you will see below, Kay, who facilitated the Action Learning Cluster, recalls this time, saying how nothing prepared her *“for the outstanding way that the practitioners created and shared their learning during the conference. I found it both humbling and emotional to see and hear how individuals talked with such passion about their practice”*. She recently sent me her reflections on the project which were extensive and revealing and they are shared in full below:



### **Liverpool Step up 4 2's Project 2013: reflections**

*The Step up 4 2's Project still, in 2022, stands out as a significant highlight in my experience of working with local authorities to improve Early Years practice especially for two year olds. It is hard to quantify all the details of why this is true, but I have attempted to gather some key reflections below.*

*The early discussions with Janice about the Project, clearly set a challenging agenda of creating rich learning opportunities for practitioners. This needed to mirror ways of working exemplified in high quality learning environments for two year olds, rather than any kind of 'delivery' model of training.*

*In her interactions with practitioners during cluster sessions and setting visits, Janice demonstrated her skills as an attentive, reflective listener using her in depth knowledge of individual practice to build confidence as well as challenging in a realistic and appropriate way. I was keen to build on this approach, to contribute to growing individual practitioner confidence and develop the cluster group as a support network for future learning.*

*In developing the content and learning experiences for the 'Working with others' aspect of the Project I wanted to demonstrate the importance of following the group learning rather than any preconceived content detail. There were, of course topics that I felt needed to be covered and Janice's reassurance to 'trust the process' was key to giving me the confidence to continue working in this way when time constraints threatened to impact.*

*The first cluster session set the tone as practitioners worked together to explore what they thought 'effective practice with two year olds' actually looked like. As a group they were able to crystalise their ideas as:*

- *Attitude - Willing to learn, Caring professional.*
- *Knowledge- Child development; Involving others.*
- *Personality- Passionate; Understanding; Professional confidence.*
- *Skills- Communication (especially mediation and advocacy); Creativity (including solution- focused problem solving)*

*From this foundation, the cluster sessions evolved to relate to, and explore, individual practice. We then identified areas practitioners wished to improve, how this improvement might be brought about and evidenced. The expectation that each practitioner would share their experience of the Project during a workshop at a conference was both motivating and daunting.*

*The ability to articulate our own practice is not, in my experience something which comes naturally to those of us working in early years. A variety of opportunities were given during the cluster sessions to develop confidence and skills, but nothing prepared me for the outstanding way that the practitioners created and shared their learning during the conference.*



*I found it both humbling and emotional to see and hear how individuals talked with such passion about their practice, challenges and successes being shared and considered with their audience. Although many had been worried about having to speak for three minutes to a group, after ten minutes the levels of involvement were so high that I found it difficult to bring the discussions to an end.*

*Following this experience with the Step Up 4 2's Project I also found that my own practice was influenced as I reflected on the response and deep level learning of the practitioners. In particular, I recognised the value of opening out our own/others' thinking during everyday practice, in order to identify effectively supporting child led learning and opportunity for peer support. Through using videos of child/adult interactions (practitioners and my own) combined with a recorded 'stream of conscious' narrative practitioners were able to problem solve ways to increase a child's level of engagement and involvement in their learning.*

*Further, in supporting practitioners to feel more confident in their interactions with parents/carers focusing on the specific skills of mediation, advocacy and perspective taking proved very useful. The parallel between adult skills and enabling children to develop these skills created a meaningful context to explore the importance of these skills in our communication with others.*

*I'm sure there have been other, more subtle changes in my practice following this project but these are the 'stand out' examples. Fundamental to the experience and success of the project was Janice's leadership of the Project. She demonstrated so clearly the importance of practitioner led learning, guided by the belief that given the opportunity practitioners will exceed all expectations in their ability to create responsive learning experiences for young children.*

**Kay Mathieson February 2022**

## 7.8 Summary of Key Learning

After such a long time after the project, the feedback that I received from each of the facilitators encouraged me and helped me to focus on what I consider to be some of the essential components that contributed to process that enabled the practitioners to develop their individual stories with real shifts in how they saw themselves and the value of the work they do.

Elizabeth commented on the significance of the practitioners formulating their own inquiry questions and feeling that maybe this was the *“first time they had been given permission to own their own learning.”* The important aspect for Julia I believe, was that of shared values and principles in a process that was “experiential”, *“collaborative and inclusive”*. Kay highlighted many aspects about the project she saw as significant, pointing out that she had found that her own practice had been influenced as she reflected upon the *“deep level learning”* of the practitioners, recognising the value of *“opening out our own/others’ thinking during everyday practice, in order to identify effectively supporting child led learning and opportunity for peer support.”* The practitioners thrived to be part of a learning community, where they could meet and work collaboratively with the other practitioners. These are just some of the ways the professional knowing of the practitioners was nurtured and able to flourish during the ‘Step-up for Twos’ project.

## 7.9 Professional knowing

When examining the nature of knowing, Schön highlighted the need for an inquiry into the “epistemology of practice” and asked:

What is the kind of knowing in which competent practitioners engage? How is professional knowing like and unlike the kinds of knowing presented in academic textbooks, scientific papers and learned journals?

(Schön, 1983: viii)

To illustrate, an example of ‘professional knowing’ is seen in a role play written by Caroline, a nursery manager who was part of the original CI. After a discussion with other SENCOs in the Action Learning Cluster, about the difficulties when having ‘challenging’ conversations with parents, particularly those that were ‘in denial’ about their child having special needs, Caroline wanted to capture some of the complexities involved. Drawing upon her own experience, and inner knowing, she developed a role play scenario to capture an imaginary meeting between a parent of a child with SEND and their key person. She performed this at the Conference, with 3 other actors who each verbalized the ‘thinking’ and ‘saying’ parts of the Mum and Emma the

key person. Unfortunately, there is no video footage of this performance, so the script below is an attempt to capture the spoken (outer world) and unspoken (inner-world) elements of the encounter that was played-out in front of an audience of over 150 people.

The full script of the role play is attached in **\*\*Appendix Five** but the first few exchanges are shown here to exemplify the idea she was trying to convey of the complexities involved when trying to work in partnership with parents. How each of us bring our own needs, worries, confusion, fears and judgment to bear on an encounter, and that what is said on the outside may not truly reflect what is occurring within.

### *Difficult Conversations- role play scenario*

Emma thinks...

*I'm scared and worried about what Mum's reaction will be....  
I'm concerned about Zac. He's not reaching his milestones.... He doesn't interact at all - he's in a world of his own.*

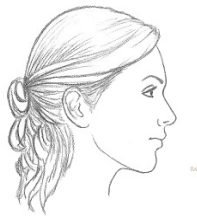


Emma says...

Oh, Hi Mrs Williams, I am so glad that you have come in today. Zac is having a lovely time in the water area.

Mum thinks...

*I'm absolutely shattered-I haven't had a good night's sleep in nearly three years now. Zac has temper tantrums, and I don't know why he keeps kicking off.... I'm really under pressure from work- my boss has given me a final warning. I can't stay long... No-one seems to understand what I'm going through.... I'm sure they don't like me here.*



Mum says....

Oh hi, yes, it's nice to be here.

Emma thinks...

She doesn't really want to be here.  
 She's not really interested in what  
 I have to say about Zac....  
 Our behaviour management  
 strategies aren't working.



Emma says...

I've got Zac's learning journey  
 file here; I thought you might  
 like to see it.

The roleplay was very powerful to watch and prompted much thought and discussion between those who saw it. As it unfolds, it demonstrates how carefully Caroline has reflected on the many barriers to developing an open, honest and reciprocal relationship with parents. Her empathy and depth of understanding and knowledge are revealed in the scenario she created. I contend that Heron's 'Extended Epistemology of Knowing' (Heron, 1996) where he describes four different but interdependent types of knowing (Heron, 1981; Heron & Reason, 2005), is very relevant to understanding the nature of Caroline's 'professional knowing' which is clearly demonstrated in this role play.

### 7.9.1 Analysis using Heron's Extended Epistemology of Knowing

Referring back to Chapter 4, **\*\*Figure 3 Heron's Pyramid of Fourfold Knowing (1996)** where an explanation of different forms of knowing was given, it is clear that the drama sequence Caroline created, is a powerful example of "practical knowing" and demonstrates how all 4 types of knowing came together to create knowledge in a living and organic way. Practical knowing

.... presupposes a conceptual grasp of principles and standards of practice, presentational elegance and experiential grounding in the situation within which the action occurs. It fulfils the three prior forms of knowing, bringing them into fruition with purposive deeds, and consummates them with an autonomous celebration of excellent accomplishment.

(Heron & Reason, 1997:281)

At the base of the pyramid sits experiential knowing which is knowing through direct face to face encounter. It is knowing through empathy, attunement and resonance with another person, the knower feeling both attuned and distinct from the other. Experiential knowing is the principal foundation for all the other forms of knowing. It is tacit, based on experience and occurs almost unconsciously, when we 'see' the other. Experiential knowledge is "that in which something is sensed but not yet capable of expression" (Hunt, 2021:157).

Presentational knowing emerges from and is grounded on experiential knowing. It is the "first clothing or articulation of experiential knowing" (Reason, 2022: 2), where the experience of that encounter is expressed, bringing into consciousness a narrative that can be made known, firstly to ourselves and then to others. It can be shared and developed through storytelling, creative writing, drawing, movement, in fact the whole range of creative and imaginative expression. By this process, "new stories and new images of who we are and what is possible can be created" (ibid).

Propositional knowing is the knowledge expressed in the forms of formal language (knowing about something). Propositional knowing makes sense of experience, drawing on concepts and ideas, operating at the level of language and concepts, and with that the ability to develop alternative theories and new narratives. At the apex of the pyramid, sits practical knowing which is built on the foundations of the other three. It is the ability to change things through action (how to do something). Practical knowing is knowing-in-action, it is knowing how to. It is different to knowing about action, it is the exercise of skill (Heron, 1996: 52).

At the heart of practical knowing is skilful doing, which may be beyond language and conceptual formulation.... John [Heron] argued for the 'primacy of the practical': as with all forms of action research, the point is not to understand the world but to act more effectively within it.

(Reason, 2022: 2)

Hunt suggests that "Heron's positioning of practical knowing/action as the consummation of all other forms of knowing, together with his accounts of what it means to enquire into each, provide answers to the questions [about professional knowing] Schön posed" (Hunt, 2012:159).

Early years practitioners demonstrate through their actions their 'theory of practice', and utilising practical knowing to create new knowledge to act more effectively in the world; they move beyond being receivers of knowledge but use their knowing to generate new knowledge and instigate change.

In this chapter I have explained how having the opportunity to lead such a large and significant project was both a responsibility and privilege, as I witnessed the increased confidence of the practitioners and saw the impact of the changes being made as the practitioners created and developed their own theories of practice and created new knowledge.

In the following chapter, to support my claims, I draw upon the reflections of practitioners in several settings who tell the story of their responses to the project. Their experiences highlight the continued impact the project has had almost 10 years later, explaining how it made a difference to their practice and to children's well-being and learning, then and now.

## **Chapter Eight**

### **Ten years on: Reflections and Impact**

*“I think that across the city that there’d been a transformation, there had been a real shift in people’s thinking.”*

Chloe Nursery Owner/Manager

## 8.1 Recalling the impact of the Collaborative Inquiry - transformational change.

In this chapter, I detail the recollections from practitioners in 3 different settings who had been involved in my research inquiry. After more than 10 years, I wondered what they recalled about the Collaborative Inquiry (CI) and if any of them had continued to use practitioner-led inquiry. I was also curious to know how their theories of practice had developed and whether my hope in transformational and sustainable change beyond the life of the project would still be evident. All settings that I visited were PVI nurseries. I had to limit my visits to 3 settings because of time constraints and chose these particular settings because I knew the practitioners were still in post and contact with them would be easily established. With their permission, I recorded each conversation and transcribed it, sending a copy of the transcript to each of them to ensure that it accurately reflected what they had said.

I had not seen Caroline since the end of the CI. At that time, the organisation that owned the nursery she worked in had been reorganised, and it became very difficult for the staff to get the time to attend training or network events that were not deemed essential. Caroline is still in post as manager of Setting L. She is line-managed by Linda, a member of the overall organisation, and is accountable to her. Linda does not have any early education qualifications or experience; her background is in business and finance. Caroline was pleased to see me and said that she remembers the time of the CI very clearly and with great fondness:



*Being part of the CI was a wonderful experience for Katie [deputy manager] and I. And I still say it at every staff meeting 'he's never going to be 2 again remember that, she's never going to be 1 again, he's never going to have that time over, so just be really, really, aware of the atmosphere you're creating for them. I think that was very important learning for us and that understanding, that belief that you know. I'm still really, really, am conscious of that...I'm conscious of that all the time, and I definitely wouldn't have been if it hadn't been for the CI, I never would have come to that understanding on my own, and I never would have been able to equate that to the experiences and thoughts I had about myself.*

Caroline: Interview March 2023

Caroline spoke passionately about this, acknowledging that it was because of the process of the CI, that she understands, *knows*, the importance of ensuring the emotional well-being of the children. She went on to explain how this affects her interactions with parents to ensure that a good relationship with them is maintained, and how much the parents appreciate this. She also referred to her continuing belief that not everyone sees the value of the work early years practitioners do.

*I think we still face all of those negative ideas about people who work in Early Years. I had a meeting with my boss the other day and she said, 'oh I've had a look at that, there's things that these Ofsted want you to jump through these hoops, it's just ridiculous, you just want your kids to be clean and happy.' And I felt really offended by that, but then when I came back into the nursery I also felt like - no she doesn't understand, I'm so glad that we have this- my welcoming, lovely bubble where the children value me, I value the children and no, you can't puncture this bubble because this is where it happens, we love each other. I do still feel offended by the views that people have of us outside, but at the end of the day I feel like we have created a safe place in here where people do value themselves, and by valuing themselves and understanding the impact that they're having on the children and the families then the children do feel that as well and that does have an impact on them.*

Caroline: Interview March 2023

I asked her to explain a little bit more about this, and she talked about the period of the Covid Lockdown, where as a team they trusted their beliefs and values, their embodied knowing, and made a decision, which other nurseries felt unable to do at that time:

*I think it's because we recognise and understand the value of what we are doing and the value of it for the children. Covid was difficult because I feel like that everybody else felt like they knew better than us, so like we are still not allowed out, not allowed to go on trips or anything like that ...my boss just doesn't see the value of that. She thinks it's too dangerous. It's really difficult and it was in Covid too. It was hard when we couldn't let parents in, but we decided as a staff team, that it was important to be able to talk to the parents each day. ...And so together we did a risk assessment but also a risk benefit analysis, and the amount of benefit in our opinion far outweighed any risk. So we made 3 entrances so the parents were able to come to the door [of each room] and we could still stand and talk to the parents and if they wanted, they could take their shoes off and keep their masks on and they were still able to bring the children in....We just didn't think it was right for the parents to not be allowed past that door, as the difference in the wellbeing of the child and the ability to communicate is massive, and it far outweighed the risk of us getting Covid. The emotional wellbeing of the children is so important. We thought, they've already been through trauma they've been at home – well not trauma but they've been at home for so long with their parents and taken out of nursery, then to return and then to just take them straight away could be so upsetting and just not good for them and their wellbeing , so we wanted to support them a little bit more and whatever we could do to make them feel a little bit better and the transition a little more positive, was a good thing.*

Caroline: Interview March 2023

As I left, Caroline told me that she still has the 'Tapestry of Squares' that the families made during the time of the CI. She took it out of the cupboard, knowing exactly where to find it, and said that when she looks at it, it is a source of pride, that all the families worked together to produce it; of all the talking that went on as they sewed it together and how well they got to know each other through doing this. However, it also makes her sad, because one little boy's mother sadly died a few years after it was made, and another family had broken up because of marital problems. She points to the squares, and I can see how much her relationships with the

children and families mean to her, and why she feels so strongly that ‘every moment counts’, because after all, *“he’s never going to be 2 again remember that, she’s never going to be 1 again, he’s never going to have that time over, so just be really, really, aware of the atmosphere you’re creating for them.”*



Photographs of the ‘Tapestry of Squares’, a quilt, sewn and made by the practitioners, children and families attending the Nursery during the time of the Collaborative Inquiry.

The next person I visited was Ada, the owner/manager of two PVI nurseries. She had taken part in the CI as well as the 'Step up for 2's Project' and was very happy to give me her time to talk about the projects and describe some of the changes that occurred in her nurseries as a result. When I asked her to tell me what she remembered about the CI, the first thing she said was that "it was transformative":

*It was transformative. It became instead of one dimensional, it became so much multi-dimensional. So, when we said 'every moment counts' at first, I thought yeah every moment counts when I'm with that child, but every moment counted for me to be very vigilant to my staff's needs, every moment counted for me to be more sensitive and not just talking to a child, but an emotional sensitivity developed that I hadn't had before, to children and my staff, people I am responsible for, accountable to. And it changed me, it made me a bit, I sort of beat myself up a bit because I hadn't thought of that before, so I was upset but also so delighted. Little did we know Covid was coming, because it was probably the best thing that ever happened to me before Covid, because I then had, a heightened emotional sensitivity, it's exhausting by the way,[laughs] it is exhausting to have that level of emotional sensitivity you know, because you are always aware of people around you, and body language, I'm not talking about words, I'm talking about a person's body language and that then naturally was something that was also relevant to parents. So, when I opened the door to parents it was like a heightened sensitivity, because you have the relationships, but it was like stop, say nothing, listen or say something, it was timing it was sensitivity, And that was just the CI, of those words 'every moment counts'....So it's about coming back to it and revisiting and not forgetting. It's exhausting. But there's been nothing more rewarding in terms of the journey, in terms of satisfaction, and passion I suppose.*

Ada: Interview June 2023

Ada explained that the level of 'emotional sensitivity' she acquired by being part of the CI, had changed her, changed the way she thought about her interactions with the children, the parents and the staff, making her, she believed a better practitioner; one that was more attuned to the emotional needs of the children, more able to truly listen to the parents "you are more present, you have noticed more things."



*So, it's about knowing your families and that community of people that you serve. What they need, they have to have a time and a place to come in. First you have to make the relationship, and that takes time, cos they have to build their trust, but you have to be available to chat to them, that's in the morning and the end of the day, chat, chat and then suddenly you're making a relationship. After that they're telling you things because they're trusting you, after that it comes out that they are in fear because their husband is... and suddenly you can help them and who else can help them? Where else can they turn when there's no family around, where they are a refugee family with a very different culture shall we say, where a man views it as his place to chastise his wife and she's all alone in a strange city.*

Ada: Interview June 2023

Ada explained that since being part of the CI and taking part in practitioner- led inquiry, that collaborative working across the team became normal practice for staff development in both her settings.

*The difference in my nursery came from the CI, from step up for 2's, the biggest changes in my nursery..... was in terms of helping me support practice and to identify, actually for the staff to identify for themselves and that was the approach- I'm not doing this to you, I'm doing it with you. This isn't being done to you so you're on the back foot and don't want to engage, this is the CI approach, we're doing this together....*

*And in our groups [the learning communities] it was the chance of people talking and actually sharing, and learning from each other instead of being told...A DIPTAC group (i.e. SENCO Network) now consists of a set of slides that are just delivered. Nobody has an opportunity to speak, and I've raised my voice about that too many times and it's not been well received because they [the LA Team] want to do it the way they do it and nobody listens.*

Ada: Interview June 2023

Ada also mentioned the many changes that have occurred within the LA since the projects finished, revealing "As soon as that funding was gone, they were pulled and all that learning, instead of it shared and built upon, it felt that it just dissipated across the sector." Now

opportunities for networking and meeting with other practitioners have greatly reduced. Hearing this reminded me of the challenges that exist when trying to establish collaborative ways of working in a system that is mechanistic and hierarchical, especially when the voice of the practitioner is not listened to.

### 8.1.1 Current Context

The capacity of LA teams to support schools and settings in their work has been significantly reduced. My discussion with Ada, highlighted the effect this is having on them in their setting, with Ada explaining that:

*Since the 'Step up for 2's' ended, we feel bereft of that sort of approach, there's hardly any training anyway, anywhere to be had. They [School Effectiveness] just say go on Noodle-now and the other thing is all these blinking Zooms. The most awful ever! That you see people's faces on a computer screen, nobody sees people's body language, which are the things that tune you in. Nobody can go for a coffee and have a private chat- where you can help each other. Different experiences, similar challenges.*

Ada: Interview June 2023

This highlights how, that although technologies like Zoom may seem convenient and more cost-effective, by providing a virtual meeting space and the chance to deliver on-line training that can be accessed at any time, the social interaction, the connection of I-with-you is missing. It separates each practitioner from the other, and thwarts 'experiential knowing' through face to face encounters (Heron 1996). Opportunities to 'help each other', by informally sharing 'different experiences, similar challenges' are curtailed. I am left wondering if this increases practitioners' feelings of isolation. Is it a return to the situation when I first joined the LA, when new SENCOs were left to struggle without a network of other SENCOs to learn with and from?

In addition, financial pressures, and difficulties in recruiting committed staff suited to the key person role, has meant that for Ada in her setting, it is more difficult to release staff so that

they can reflect and plan together. Ada also believes that confidence in young and new staff is lacking, she continues:

*It's difficult to bring other people on the journey, because they are not as confident, and confidence is everything. As well, for a practitioner because they always feel they need to prove, everything has to be evidenced based it undermines their confidence. Currently the stresses are outweighing everything because you're not getting the time to operate like this [reflecting together] But it's the easiest things are the simplest things and its quite succinct really. People getting time together, I think people have to have a voice and if people respect that, your voice, you become confident. That's the journey of confidence, that you are re-assured, that you are given the time and support to have a go, all of those things, that you've got someone you can turn to when you are feeling nervous about something. All of those things are in place for us here [in the setting], but Early Years is probably in the worst situation in all of the years I've worked in it.*

Ada: Interview June 2023

## 8.2 Recalling the impact of the 'Step up for two- year- olds Project' - transformational change.

My theory of practice influenced how the 'Step up for Two's' was organised, see \*\* 7.2.1 Stepping-up for Two Year Olds- a strategic approach. This incorporated much of the learning from the Collaborative Inquiry. The practitioners were involved in practitioner-led inquiry involving first, and second person inquiry approaches, creating knowledge in collaboration with others. I approached Chloe, a Nursery Owner/ Manager who had taken part in the project and had been very enthusiastic about it at the time. Aware that I was coming, Chloe arranged time for me to also talk to other staff members in her nursery. She explained how she saw my visit as a chance to really think about why the 'Step up for 2's' project was so significant for her and the practitioners. The first things she mentioned were 'autonomy' and 'camaraderie within and between people'.

*People were given that autonomy within their own setting ... and you could see them having that gem of an idea and thinking 'well actually I've always wanted to develop this, but I've never been able to work in that way'. And I think reflecting on your own setting, thinking where are we now, and where do we want to go in small increments, sharing with the others in the group and then with the team back in the nursery, it sort of grew and developed.... because you weren't just going and learning and then never having to revisit, you knew you would have to go back and report back and there was almost camaraderie within and between the people who were attending the course to say 'well what are you going to do, how did you share this?'*

Reflections on the Step-up for 2's Project: Chloe Interview January 2023

Rachel, the Manager of Chloe's setting, described how they wanted to develop leadership skills across the setting and how taking part in the Step up for 2's project was the beginning of this, referring to the "working lunches" that were started during that time saying, "we still have them now".

*We wanted to see leadership in terms of practitioners in rooms being leaders too, so it isn't just about the manager, and so when you have a leader like Chloe who can support and nourishes their staff and gives them opportunities to become leaders of practice. I think that was really the start of us ...the team taking ownership of it. And there was a period where we had so many ideas coming back that we almost had a waiting list time, staff were saying 'Can I do a staff meeting on this? Can I do that?' So much so that we had to implement working lunches and we still have them now, so it has changed the way that we reflect on things and their confidence, because beforehand if you had said well you are going to run the staff meeting, people would have said well I'm not doing it, or I'm not confident to do that but I think everyone, more or less, everyone has done it.*

**Reflections on the Step-up for 2's Project. Rachel (Manager) January 2023.**

Alisa, a key person in the 'Twos' room' had attended the 'Enabling Environments' Action Learning Cluster and was keen to tell me what she remembered about that time:



*I love talking about this because it's so important to everything that we've done, and our foundation and our structure of what we've been built from is that [Step up for 2's project]. It literally just opened so many more avenues and so much more development progress. I feel that like, that has been the foundation and the bottom structure of what we've then been able to build up on and obviously bring our own pedagogy into that system and the impact has been phenomenal. And it was making an impact month to month to month and your final target of it all coming together at the conference, it was just, being able to have your own knowledge, your own choice, your own input and yeah, I found from that course that's where we've now flourished with that child-centred approach, of yeah, that every child is different coming in.*

Reflections on the Step-up for 2's Project. Alisa (Key person) January 2023.

Alisa was a new practitioner when she attended the Action Learning Cluster and this experience quite clearly had made a significant difference to her, deepening her understanding and strengthening her confidence. "It definitely did to enhance what we were doing- the I wonder board. It was really eye opening." Alisa continued her explanation:

*When we came back, we'd just do a plan from the inspiration of what we'd learned, it was so empowering.... Every month we had a team meeting, look how important this is. That in-house training so everyone would know how important it was, you'd speak to the girls. I loved it, I felt so passionate about it. I loved going into the other girls, going look at this idea, and then everyone was doing little set-ups, making changes, taking photos, and bringing them into our staff meetings saying look what we are doing here, look at how much better and how we can enhance everything we are doing. I felt really empowered, about doing the inhouse training with everybody, and even just the changes we were making, what we were seeing, the impact it was having, we were seeing like behaviour changes, the children more settled and engaged, what we were saying, it made an impact on every single staff member individually and hopefully we passed that on.*

Reflections on the Step-up for 2's Project. Alisa (Key person) January 2023.

Chloe also continued to share her reflections. She spoke at length, too much to include all of it in the main body of the thesis, and so it has been captured in Appendix Six \*\*Transcript of Chloe's reflections on the 'Step up for 2's' Project. She described how much of what the setting currently does is just "normal for us now, but at the time it was big, a transformative experience, a big shift.... We still have our monthly working lunch and a big staff meeting every 6 weeks, where we use the 'I wonder if...' board, so it is that model, the ripple and its come from then and it has developed other people, new staff."

*The 'I wonder if' question made us think more deeply about our relationships with parents- we are all part of a family, whether we are a parent or a practitioner. We ask parents so many questions about their family circumstances, but we weren't sharing anything about ours. It wasn't on equal terms; it has got to be reciprocal. It's hard to remember how different it was before, as this is so much part of how our setting is now. We just assume that when a new practitioner starts with us, you give us a family photograph, but some people think this is very strange. 'I couldn't work there if you wanted to know so much about me and my family'. So that is why we need to return to it, revisit our journey and explain why we work in this way. So, we still use the 'I wonder...' board, if we want to make changes, or if we want to revisit something. So, after Covid, we revisited the question 'I wonder if parents know what our setting is like and understand what the children do when they are here?' Things had changed so much, visits were restricted, we were unable to give parents and children as much time for transition visits etc. Doing the 'I wonder if' question really helped to put those values back, re-energised our practice with parents.*

Reflections on the Step-up for 2's Project: Chloe Interview January 2023

When transcribing Chloe's words, I was reminded about something she had written to me in a 'thank you card' she had sent in February 2015. This was at the time when the setting had achieved their first 'outstanding' OfSTED judgement. *"Last week watching my team with the inspector was unbelievable. I was so proud that they were able to speak confidently and explain the rationale behind everything they do and the difference that makes to the children who use [our Nursery] .... It's a new way of working that not everyone understands but it works!"*

This ‘new way of working’ was obviously still continuing in Chloe’s setting. It had changed, and evolved, but the elements of practitioner led inquiry are still there, the establishment of the inquiry questions (I wonder if...) the action/reflection/evaluation cycles, within a Nursery setting that works collaboratively and prioritises time for this, finding creative ways to identify time for staff to reflect and discuss together. The knowledge the staff have of their children and families, and their ability and confidence to articulate clearly what they are doing and why. I also witnessed Chloe’s commitment to her staff, her belief in their strengths and she, in the words of Rachel her manager is a *“leader... who can support and nourishes [her] staff and gives them opportunities to become leaders of practice.”*

Finally, I include Chloe’s summary of what it felt like at the end of project Conference, how there was a particular energy, and that amongst the early years practitioners there was “a feeling of pride, and not just us, it was a collective pride.”

*I think that across the city that there’d been a transformation, there had been a real shift in people’s thinking, there had been, I know I keep talking about power, but there was because it wasn’t aimed at owners and managers it was aimed at the staff who were working with the children but it was pitched in such a way that you brought your manager along and they had to buy in, but it was them [the practitioners] that were leading it ..Then all of a sudden they weren’t just going on one course and coming back, and then everything they had remembered , everything they did, had been forgotten, I think it was that it was longitudinal... that things were happening and you were changing a little bit, reflecting on that, coming back, using the “I wonder if” question, ‘what does it mean for your setting, and how did it work for the people in your team as well?’... I think at the end when we had that celebration event, there was a real feeling of pride, and not just us, it was a collective pride. Alisa: Yes, it was a togetherness, wasn’t it?*

Reflections on the Step-up for 2’s Project. Chloe and Alisa January 2023.

The above practitioner accounts, give an insight into the continued impact in three settings, that this ‘new way of working’ had, and is still having a decade later. It was an approach to

professional development which has resulted in change, both personal, in the sense of how individuals see themselves, and professional in terms of changes to practice and provision. Changes which have been sustained beyond the life of the project. I no longer work for the LA and cannot claim that all of the settings involved in the initial projects have continued with this way of working; I do not know. However, in the stories of these practitioners, I find encouragement, reigniting my conviction in the potential of collaborative learning; that it is important to create an 'enabling space', a community of learning, in which practitioners have a voice and can be listened to, one in which dialogue is central and through which their inner knowing is acknowledged and built upon, being process which fosters a spirit of inquiry and explores possibilities for change. This provides a way through which practitioners might sustain themselves, in order to understand the value of their role and to recognise that they hold knowledge and can create knowledge for the benefit of children they work with.

Drawing upon the recollections of practitioners in three settings and capturing their responses to the Collaborative Inquiry and the Practitioner-led inquiries in this chapter, their accounts have shown the transformational impact the changes have had beyond the life of the project. Transformational for Caroline and Ada because of the personal shift in mindset to become more emotionally sensitive to the inner world of children, parents and staff and the effect this has had on them by recognising the importance of relationships. For those in Chloe's setting the learning was also described as transformational, beginning a journey of inquiry based learning that has changed both provision and practice within the setting.

What was it about the process of learning that enabled this to happen? Would it be possible to create the right conditions for this to happen again, with different groups of practitioners? In the following chapter I explore how my own theory of practice developed. I examine how through using relational ways of working, I used my influence to facilitate a value based process which encouraged and supported practitioners to take responsibility to generate knowledge about their own life and their own practice. I show how by working with others in a learning

community early years practitioners were supported to engage in practitioner-led inquiry, articulating their theories of practice and creating new knowledge.

## **Chapter Nine**

**An evolving theory of practice- a journey for  
over a decade.**

“.... a constant relational reciprocity between those who educate and those who are educated, between those who teach and those who learn. There is participation, passion, compassion, emotion. There is aesthetics; there is change.”

(Rinaldi, 2021:141)

This chapter offers an explanation of the impact my influence has had over the course of my research inquiry. It tells the story of how my theory of practice developed through the journey of my research inquiry as I researched my own practice and learned with and from the practitioners I worked with. I identify and explore the elements of a value based process which encouraged and supported practitioners to research their own practice.

## 9.1 The Significance of I >< We: Reflecting on practice- individually and collectively

The methodology for the research is detailed in chapter 3 but, simply put, action research involves cycles of action and reflection in order to make improvements to practice. By engaging in practitioner led inquiry, with practitioners reflecting individually as well as with others, action was taken to improve practice (some examples are demonstrated in chapters 5 and 7). Working collaboratively with others is important as there is a concern that in action research, practitioners who only reflect on by themselves, are more likely to reduce action research to a form of technical rationality. However, by working collaboratively with others, engaging in collaborative reflection, enables those involved to critique accepted assumptions as well as the system and structures that shape them and what they do (Elliot 1991). Pine highlights how

Reflection is more than the individual thinking about his or her practice in isolation.... collaborative reflection is a powerful and effective medium for deeply exploring ideas and practice. Collaborative reflection involves two or more people engaging in conversation about their practice, raising questions, providing feedback, sharing opinions and perspectives, raising awareness, challenging personal beliefs, and searching to advance their knowledge and understanding. Collaborative reflection is a prerequisite for developing and sustaining a culture of inquiry.

Pine (2009:187)

Much has been written about critical reflection and reflective practice (Dewey 1933; Schon, 1983; Marshall, 2016; Hunt, 2021). Cheryl Hunt makes an important point when she states, “many practitioners and researchers still find it difficult to articulate their values, identify their learning and develop theory from it.” (Hunt, 2021: 5). It is to this idea of developing theory from reflective engagement ‘in and on action’ (Schön, 1983), and its relationship to the creation

of knowledge, that I now turn, showing how engaging in practitioner led inquiry in a collaborative value based process enabled the articulation of practitioners' theories of practice, which is different to 'borrowing theories to explain practice'.

## 9.2 Reflective Thinking and Theories of Practice

In practitioner-led inquiry, the process of reflective thinking means that issues of pressing concern or that are meaningful and relevant to everyday practice are identified, analysed and reviewed, resulting in action (changes to practice) as new theories of practice are carried out, which then evolve as a result of new experiences and further reflection. In this way practitioners take ownership of what they do, monitoring and evaluating the actions they have taken in a continuing cycle (Kolb 1984).

As argued earlier in chapter 4, knowledge is not static, it is fluid and changing because everyone builds upon their prior knowledge and continues to develop it through experiences. I believe that in writing the above sentence again but replacing the word 'knowledge' with 'knowing' makes this idea clearer- shifting our perception to highlight the organic, evolving nature of knowing more effectively....As discussed earlier in chapter 4, knowing is not static, it is fluid and changing because everyone builds upon their prior knowing and continues to develop it through experiences.

Knowing is understood as a way of doing things, one which focuses on the relationship between our actions and is an active process in which we are all engaged (Dewey 1938;1955). This is a very different way of seeing knowledge and learning; not understanding it as the 'transmission of packages of knowledge' from say teacher to learner or with applying theory to practice, but rather as Peter Moss explains:

Learning understood in this way connects with a particular understanding of knowledge itself....as perspectival, partial and provisional where the image is a rhizome (Deleuze & Parnet 1987; Deleuze & Guattari 1999) something which shoots in all directions, with no beginning and no end, but always in between, with openings towards other directions and places.  
(Moss, 2006:36)



When we have an expanded understanding of knowing and start to question the role of traditional ways of seeing the world, we understand how “theory generation is far from neutral but is a deeply politicised practice.” (Whitehead and Mc Niff 2006:28). Theory and practice form “a symbiotic unity, a living praxis, knowledge in action and action as knowledge” (Reason, 2002. quoted in Ledwith and Springett 2010: 109).

Developing a theory of practice is a living action, involving drawing on inner knowing in beneficial relationship with reflection. The work of Donald Schön has been particularly influential when considering “The Reflective Practitioner” (Schön, 1983; 1987). As Cheryl Hunt points out, practitioners are frequently encouraged to apply Schön’s theories to their own contexts and situations, but for Schön himself, reflective practice had to be worked through, it had to be *enacted* (Smith 2001/2011). Referring to the work of Larrivee (2000) Hunt highlights how

The path to developing as a critically reflective [practitioner] cannot be prescribed with an intervention formula. The route cannot be preplanned. It must be lived.

(Hunt 2021:5)

In her book ‘*Critical Reflection, Spirituality and Professional Practice*’, Cheryl Hunt (2021) offers innovative insights into understanding reflective practice as transformative learning.

In her writing she often uses metaphor and images to illustrate her thinking. Hunt conceptualises reflective practice as a temporary resting place and uses the idea of group of wagon-bearing travellers journeying on a road with an unknown destination. The unreflective practitioner

.... trudges ever onwards, accumulating experiences but never examining them. Thus, while his/her ‘wagonloads of experiences’ may be considerable, without the benefits of new insights or perspectives, the knowledge in them remains static.

(ibid 197)

The reflective practitioner however, purposefully ‘unhitches their wagon of experiences’ in order to ‘review and learn from the contents’ so that:

Reflective practice provides an opportunity to ‘re-paint’ one’s experiences and ideas into new patterns and share them with others as a basis for dialogue and further

patterning. From this resting place one can look back along the road already travelled and at possible ways forward, perhaps informed by the maps and stories of fellow-travellers. (ibid)

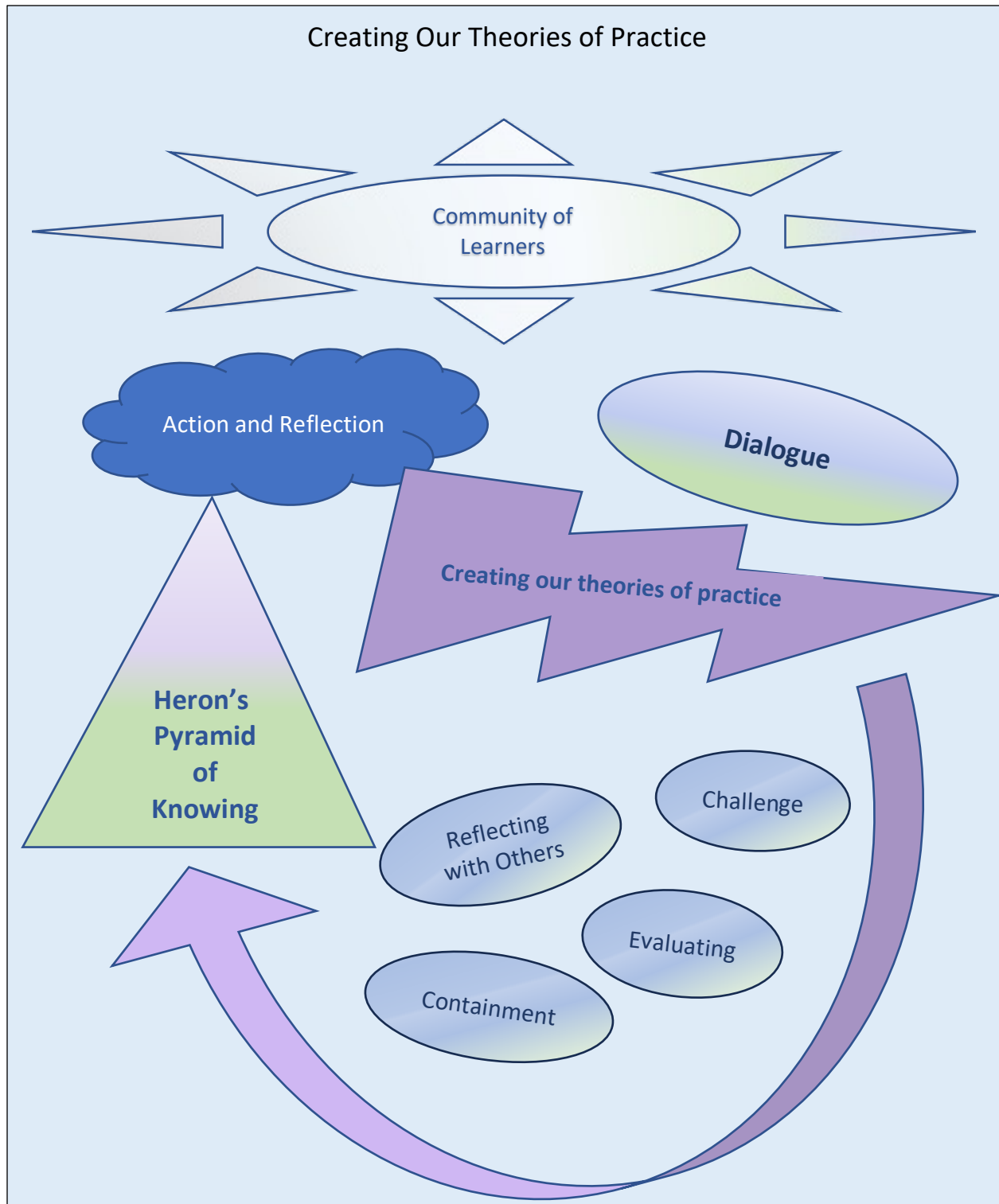
Co-construction of knowledge involves creating knowledge in relationship with others, engaging in dialogue with them, sometimes reaching shared understanding, sometimes reaching a diversity of interpretation (Ledwith and Springett 2010). Theories of practice are personal, living, changing and evolving from reflection on experiences encountered and influenced by 'the maps and stories of fellow-travellers'. They will be informed by the practitioner's understanding of individual children and of children overall. By articulating our theories of practice in the company of others, they are examined and refined or reframed. In initiating a process that supported practitioners to learn with and from each other through dialogue and reflection, I facilitated a process by which practitioners were enabled to articulate and develop their own theories of practice, new knowledge, which could then be tested and evaluated in a continuous cycle. This involves observing and reflecting on what we do in practice, making sense of our actions through researching them, and gathering information that will support our claims of what we are doing and why. These theories of practice are validated through the critical feedback of others (Whitehead and McNiff 2016: 32).

Such reflective engagement creates opportunities to make links between established theory and practice, thus bringing together the various forms of knowledge that we hold. Heron saw practical knowledge, knowing how, as the "consummation, of the knowledge quest." (Heron, 1996:34). Reflection also helps to develop an awareness of self that enhances personal confidence and efficacy (Allman, 1983). Valuing practitioner knowledge and creating a safe space in which to inquire, leads to a shift in expectation as to what can be done; it is a way of working that is an on-going process of noticing, interpreting, doing, reflecting and evaluating; creating new knowledge and opening up potentials and possibilities for change.

The 'possibilities for change' were just that. They could not have been pre-determined before the start of the process, and although I had considered some changes to practice and provision

that may occur, I had not fully understood the significance of the inner world of thoughts and feelings, nor foreseen the shifts in practitioner identity that happened. Writing about this process cannot capture the energy, and the dynamic nature of it; how in dialogue, the practitioners listened attentively and respectfully, making connections with their own experiences and learning. There was much to share which prompted questions in response. I was surprised by the range and depth of emotions that were revealed, I had not experienced this before in a professional context. At first, I felt a little uneasy about it, thinking that it seemed improper to be so open. Why should I be feeling this way? After reflecting on this, I realised that my uneasiness stemmed from my worry that other people, like my line manager, would think it was not right for me to ‘allow’ the practitioners to act in this way; it was also intertwined with the idea of having to ‘stay in control of the research process’. However, as the research progressed, I came to understand that dialogue is not just a cognitive process, it engages the emotions and is part of what makes us fully human. Emotion contributes to the richness of the dialogue. As co-researcher, working with the practitioners, I was part of this, “a collective phenomenon, part of the collective meaning that was created” (Ledwith and Springett 2010:129). Whilst a mechanistic world view seeks order and control, this alternative way of being with the practitioners was different from that. This was participatory and enabling, building trust and connections between us all, where there was reciprocity.

Paying attention to emotional energy is important because this can be a time when ‘light bulb’ moments occur or become the source of creativity. Sometimes however, experiences that are shared are painful to recall, or provoke feelings of distress and hurt. Figure 10 below, captures the various elements that come together to enable the formation of our theories of practice. An important aspect of the dialogic space is “containment”. No one person had a responsibility for this. Rather it was a collective sense of shared trust and respect that fostered an understanding that we all cared about each other, and that painful feelings could be revealed without judgement, contained within the supporting arms of this group.



**Figure 10** *Creating Our Theories of Practice*

The figure above is a visual attempt to capture the various elements of the process that was taking place within the community of learning. It was a dialogic space, where the concept of 'pedagogical isomorphism' (Formosino, and Formosino, 2012) was enacted. An explanation of this was given earlier (see *\*\*Figure 4 Generative Pedagogical Isomorphism*), which includes four aspects - dialogue, reflection, challenge and containment, all of which are included in the figure above. A two dimensional visual representation, however, cannot capture the living energy that was present, a dynamic that fostered the creation of knowledge. Within the learning community, the sharing of each other's 'research stories' was the impetus for dialogue. Each of the elements were interconnected and worked together to create a safe and enabling space. Heron's extended pyramid of knowing stands in the corner, in recognition of the different forms of knowing that were being utilised. Reflecting with others meant that individual research stories were articulated and commented on. Challenge may present itself by being asked a probing question, something you had not thought of, but some challenges were inner conflicts that you had now become aware of and had to resolve. Sometimes differences of opinion did occur, but these were also part of the process and gave rise to empathy, when people began to understand that different experiences and contexts informed the ways in which we see the world. Ledwith and Springett (2010:128) describe dialogue as more than a conversation:

It is a relational exchange process that allows interplay between people in a trusting, respectful way, to explore new understandings openly in the language of feelings, ideas, facts, dissent, opinions and plans. It is a connected knowing; one that pays full attention to others by suspending our own truth.

When listening to the practitioners' research stories, I became aware of my own thought patterns; for example, how quick I was to judge, and then realising how I was making assumptions before I really understood. As a researcher and facilitator, I had to let go of my 'own truth', taking care not to 'guide' the dialogue in a way I thought it would be best. I learned to be a more attentive listener and to trust the process as it unfolded, "in dialogue by paying attention to the spaces between us, we move from interaction to participating in the creation of common meaning" (ibid).

### 9.3 Recalling Main Points of my Research Journey - exploring new ways of working.



**Figure 11 Key Experiences Influencing my Evolving Theory of Practice**

In this section I examine three key phases of my research inquiry, separated in time but which informed each other as new contexts, new challenges and new experiences caused my theory of practice to change and evolve. The aim for establishing the Collaborative Inquiry was to offer an alternative approach to 'training' and a different way of working. It was influenced by *'Co-operative Inquiry. Research into the Human Condition'* (Heron 1996) a form of participative, person-centred inquiry, researching *with* people not *on* them (ibid 1996:19). We each began researching our own practice, returning to a collaborative context, where we worked together to support and encourage one another. As the initiating researcher, I facilitated a process which enabled the practitioners to be open to learning the skills and understandings they needed to improve their practice, to feel valued and have the confidence to participate.

The approach taken in the Collaborative Inquiry, was important. It was process based, involving

group as well as an individual exploration of the question, '*How can I improve my practice?*'. The time between meetings, gave the practitioners the opportunity to talk with other members of their team back in their settings and, with them, engage in critical thinking to identify and develop changes to practice that had personal meaning and relevance to the practitioners involved. Returning back to the CI and coming together with the other co-researchers, to work in collaboration to explore shared themes, meant that each of us was able to question and to learn with and from each other's experience and learning; in this way, the practitioners came to value themselves and recognise that the potential and power to work effectively lies within. This process, led to claims of improved relationships with children and families and improvements in practice, evidenced through written accounts, video and photographs, as demonstrated earlier in Chapter Five

### 9.3.1 Resonance I-with-you, I><We

As our shared inquiries developed, through dialogue in a safe and trusting space, each member of the group learned to pay attention to and reflect upon their practice, articulating their personal knowing. By discussing and sharing our stories, a resonance was experienced as we began to recognise and understand the significance of embodied knowledge to our understanding of ourselves and our actions in the world, contributing to a growth in confidence and a willingness to put new ideas into practice.

Discussing resonance as an important element in qualitative inquiries, Sarah Tracy (Tracy 2010), refers to the work of Stake and Trumbull (1982), using the term 'naturalistic generalization' to explain that:

While formal generalizations assume that knowledge is what leads to improved practice, Stake and Trumbull argue that the *feeling of personal knowing* and experience is what leads to improved practice... Through the process of naturalistic generalizations, readers make choices based on their own intuitive understanding of the scene, rather than feeling as though the research report is instructing them what to do.

(Tracy 2010: 844 italics mine)

Having an expanded view of what knowledge is, that there were many ways of knowing, as well as understanding and recognising our own embodied knowledge, contributed to transforming how we (as co-subjects and co-researchers) saw ourselves. Practitioners took ownership of the changes to practice that were made. Engaging in practitioner-led inquiry, enabled those involved to be not just receivers of knowledge (putting someone else's good idea into practice) but knowledge-creators, developing, demonstrating and giving voice to our own personal theories of practice, theories which emerged from a secure sense of personal knowing.

A healthy self has what could be labelled a voice meaning more than a perspective or point of view. A voice is the expression of one's soul, one's spirit, what is unique to each person, one's mind/body together. A person's voice is one's "I," one's feelings/thoughts/intuitions all rolled into one. It is the subjective, that which one cannot lose or leave out of one's thinking process.

(Thayer-Bacon 1997:246)

Developing one's own theory of practice is an organic, evolving unfolding process, informed by experience, thinking and ideas, responding to others in a collaborative connection which in turn influences practice; experience of that practice influences theoretical understanding so that action and reflection are integrated, which is the essence of action research. In action research, research and practice are not separate, but each inform the other in cycles of action and reflection when the research is applied to professional practice.

### 9.3.2 Relational Knowing

My work and research were closely linked and at times it was as if they could have been interchangeable terms. I was researching my own practice, a practitioner-researcher, and as my work involved working with others, namely early years practitioners, I was researching collaboratively *with them*, not *on them*. As such I was taking a particular epistemological stance, adopting a relational epistemology which values relational forms of knowing and coming to know. This is in contrast to individual descriptions of knowledge which have dominated western epistemological theories for so long (Thayer-Bacon 2010). It felt so different from the ways of working, being and thinking in the LA of which I was a part, that I had initially questioned if this really was 'research' at all. However, the power of connection, the "connected knowing"



(Ledwith and Springett 2010) that developed out of the CI, convinced me that we were indeed constructing knowledge together and that:

we be- come knowers and are able to contribute to the constructing of knowledge due to the relationships we have with others. None of us are able to make contributions without the help of others, and none of us discover new ideas all on our own

(Thayer-Bacon 2003: 2)

Relationship specific-knowledge has often been ignored by science because it is so difficult to explain, define and measure (Abma, 2006). However, relational discourses acknowledge a “matrix of human experience” rather than individual experience separated from context (Papatheodorou 2009:11). Yet technocratic approaches to educational improvement dominate, where experience is separated from context, and knowledge that is abstract, detached, explicit, and scientifically based is privileged. In consequence “local knowledge”, that which is personal, experiential, tacit, and practice based is largely ignored. Practitioners’ voices are not heard, and their knowing is not valued (Abma, 2006).

Relational knowing is organic, inherently dynamic, and in constant flow “continually refined and co-created by interaction with new experiences... as the context of knowledge continually changes, creating new experiences” (Ledwith and Springett 2010: 129). My own theory of practice changed and developed as my interactions and experiences with the practitioners affected what I understood and believed to be. As explained earlier, the project began with the recognition of each practitioner as a ‘strong and powerful learner’, but now I understood how they were “knowledge creators” articulating their own knowing and theories of practice. The Collaborative Inquiry had shown the value of providing a process and the conditions in which to do this, and had a continuing impact on how the practitioners involved saw themselves, and carried out their work.

My theory of practice influenced how the ‘Step-up-for Twos’ project was organised. The Collaborative Inquiry could never be replicated, as the context was very different, but as far as possible the values, principles and learning from the CI informed the nature of the Action

Learning Groups. The process was similar, fostering a spirit of inquiry in a safe and trusting space in which relationships were at the heart of learning; using inquiry questions that the practitioners had identified themselves; sharing their stories in a process of dialogue, individual and collaborative reflection, evaluation and feedback. The 'Step up for 2's' project provided the means that would:

Replace the traditional reliance on power and control with a new emphasis on learning and exploration. This process is not about learning a set of fixed answers.... but learning as a continuous process of coming to know.

(Whitaker 1997:145)

By working together in purposeful investigation, the practitioners started to generate and test new knowledge. In this way individuals began to create and articulate their own theories of practice in collaboration with others, in a continuing process of 'coming to know'.

The 'creation of common meaning' certainly occurred in practitioner-led research in a collaborative context; by engaging in dialogue and sharing their research stories, the practitioners were able to learn with and from each other, becoming conscious of, and beginning to question, familiar ways of thinking and doing. By doing this, they became more open to new ideas and possibilities. In dialogue, the challenge is to move thinking past mental models that have constrained and choked individual flourishing (Bohm, 1990) to a more expansive way of thinking which will reveal new knowledge (Ledwith and Springett 2010). To see this happen also affected me, as I witnessed the transformation in individual practitioners as they began to trust their inner knowing, gaining confidence in themselves and in what they could do, and thereby, to flourish.

### 9.3.3 A Relational Approach to Professional Development

Earlier, I discussed the development of theories of practice in relation to the CI and return to this now to demonstrate with an example. Coming together as a learning community, engaging in dialogue and reflection, enabled Caroline, a nursery manager, to identify a particular concern in her setting. Working in relational ways with her staff, they began to engage together in an

inquiry to explore how the emotional environment within the rooms, could be improved for the benefit of the children. It is this process that I wish to highlight. During the CI, discussions had taken place which focused on listening attentively to children, co-constructing learning with them. We considered the role of the adult and the nature of an emotional learning environment in order for children to learn and thrive, and the need for practitioners to ‘tune in’ to each unique child.

A Literature Review for the New Zealand government, *‘Quality Childhood Education for under-two-year-olds: What should it look like?’* (Dalli et al, 2011) discussed the need for practitioners to develop “intersubjective attunement” (ibid:3). The authors highlight how research evidence points to the importance of learning environments which “actively avoid toxic stress” because toxic stress blocks the development of responsive attuned care.

Reviewed research implies that the best way of doing this is to have adults working with children who understand the impact of their actions on children’s development and are trained to make that impact a positive one.

(Dalli et al, 2011:3)

This caused me to consider how practitioners can be ‘trained’ to know this. By what means can training encourage such deep reflection on inner feelings and thoughts? The technical application of abstract knowledge about the concept of ‘intersubjectivity’ will be limited; to truly understand, it has to be lived, enacted, articulated and reflected upon. I contend, that by trusting the practitioner’s inner knowing, as an important source of knowledge, and supporting practitioners to recognise and connect with their inner world of thoughts and feelings, will be necessary to establishing an understanding of an attuned practitioner-child relationship and the significance of an emotionally nourishing environment.

In the CI, Caroline’s account demonstrated how inquiring collaboratively with others led to a dialogue about the nature of adult and child interaction. This prompted her to reflect on her own experiences and make connections with her past and how she came to view herself, describing that “these experiences and observations of life as a child moulded my soul.”

In her setting Caroline noticed *“There is a negative atmosphere in [the toddler room] and while practitioners are polite to each other, the mood can be quite strained at times”*. She was concerned about the impact this was having on the children and *“how the children interpret this whole situation.”* This reflection then became the focus for her research inquiry, enabling her to support the staff to work together in the nursery to research their practice. Individually and collectively, they began to deepen their awareness of the emotional learning environment they were creating, together surfacing the specific barriers that existed, and learning to understand the ways in which their moment by moment interactions with children need to be sensitive, responsive and attuned.

Training, I argue, has to involve more than the delivery of key theories or facts, but needs to be understood as a co-constructive process, one that takes a relational approach to professional development, engaging in participatory approaches to learning, which support practitioners to become more confident and to trust in their own knowing. In Heron’s (1996) terms, this relates to ‘presentational’ and ‘experiential’ ways of knowing alongside those in the ‘propositional’, cognitive domain of knowing, resulting in ‘practical knowing’ expressed in actions.

Theodora Papatheodorou (2009) talks of relational pedagogy as an alternative pedagogy and describes it as “an empowering force for knowing ourselves and others”.

.... for making sense of others and making sense of ourselves because of others. Relational pedagogy is about individuality and the collective consciousness that is shaped and transformed in time and place. Relational pedagogy bridges the false dichotomy between outcomes-based and processes-oriented pedagogical praxis. It articulates and makes explicit the underpinning principles of processes and their importance for achieving outcomes that have personal and collective relevance, meaning and use.

(Papatheodorou 2009:14)

Relational pedagogy is relational knowing in practice, and as such is difficult to define, because relationships between people are constantly changing and evolving, never still. Papatheodorou

describes it as an organic process of co-creation which is responsive to the interests, needs and passions of those involved, it is:

the 'in-between' space occupied by all those involved in the learning process .... In this space conflict may arise, if feelings and others' views are not considered, but these conflicts are also negotiated through a dialogical process.

(Papatheodorou 2009:11)

Relational pedagogy reflects the I-with-you (I><We) strategy of inquiry that has been adopted in this research, where individual and collective meaning making occurred and "the collective consciousness.... shaped and transformed in time and space" (ibid). I observed these shifts, and documented earlier how they resulted in personal and professional change. By inquiring into my practice, I was finding a way of working, creating the conditions that enabled practitioners to do just this. It was founded on the principle that we were all learners, co-subjects, co-researchers where everyone's opinion mattered, and we were all equal partners in our inquiry together. This has several elements in common with what Carlina Rinaldi (2021) describes as 'relational professional development', when she explains the approach taken in Reggio Emilia Nurseries. Here the teacher as researcher is enacted, actively interweaving doing- reflecting and theory- practice. Rinaldi illustrates how research is a permanent attitude and a way of working used by both children and adults. She describes how in the Nurseries of Reggio Emilia, the belief is that personal and professional development and indeed education, are something that people construct themselves in relation with the other. They are based on shared values and are constructed together. Rinaldi describes relational professional development as

.... a constant relational reciprocity between those who educate and those who are educated, between those who teach and those who learn. There is participation, passion, compassion, emotion. There is aesthetics; there is change.

(Rinaldi 2021:141)

She sees participation, as essential to relational professional development, not just in terms of being able to contribute, but to feel a sense of belonging, being a part of what is happening. Her insight, strengthened my conviction that finding ways to support

practitioners to feel valued, feel acknowledged, able to contribute and have their voices heard is highly significant, and ways should be found to ensure that this happens.

Thus, my own understandings and assumptions were challenged, and my knowing grew as the research inquiry progressed. Working collaboratively with the practitioners, we had experienced all that Rinaldi had referred to, there was a sense of belonging, there was emotion, 'passion, empathy, compassion...change'. When my inquiry began, I questioned if it was 'right' to feel like this. I am much more confident now in my own understanding, as I recognise that any doubts I had were because the world is framed very differently in the hierarchical, mechanistic paradigm of the LA. A participatory worldview is one of connection, trust in others, enabling, not controlling. I saw for myself that working in relational ways and developing a 'community of learners' provided a context in which the practitioners felt able to reveal their thoughts and feelings, a place where trust existed, where people could disclose issues that troubled or upset them; a place for listening and dialogue. This safe space was sufficiently containing so that the disclosures themselves changed the practitioners' relationship to the struggle. The fact that they had been listened to, respected and valued, provided the 'nutrients' to counter the sometimes toxic effects of the situations they faced in the workplace (Whitaker 1997). Observing this happen, influenced my theory of practice, as it changed and developed as I reflected on the actions I had taken and considered the 'potential and possibilities' of using my new understandings to inform future ways of working collaboratively with others in ECEC.

## 9.4 Developing Practitioner- led Inquiry in various contexts.

### 9.4.1 The Early Years SENCO Award

I looked for opportunities to introduce more relational ways of working with the practitioners, which found ways to involve them more and highlight their value. In the previous chapter, reference was made to the "*Liverpool Award for Early Years SENCOs*". As the lead Area SENCO, I had for many years delivered training to newly appointed SENCOs about the SEND Code of Practice (DfES, 2001). Knowing that the SEND Code of Practice was being updated, and influenced by my new understandings from the CI, I wanted to make the training more

relational and participatory. In 2013, I set up a 'SEND Collaborative Inquiry' (SEND CI) with a group of PVI managers and SENCOs and a member of Speech and Language Therapy Team (SLT). Together we explored the question 'How can we provide appropriate support and training for SENCOs in pre-school settings to put the new SEND Code into practice?'. From this collaboration, we planned an accredited programme for Early Years SENCOs which I wrote and delivered between October 2014 and March 2015. The first cohort of 19 SENCOs attained the accreditation (Level 3 Qualification in SEN and Disability with a Level 4 Unit in SEN Co-ordination CACHE registration and certification).

The course adopted an action research approach which offered new learning, and as much as possible, time for reflection, interaction and dialogue. Each SENCO developed a portfolio of evidence through self-study and research, exploring questions of relevance to them in their setting which, through using action and reflection cycles, enabled 'practice and theory' to become more closely aligned. Of significance was a focus on the nature of relationships - between SENCO and staff, practitioner and child, practitioner and parents, practitioner and wider SEND support services. Through discussions in the SEND CI, it became clear that SENCOs often lacked confidence when speaking to members of specialist services, with some feeling intimidated by their expertise and by being unable to put 'names to faces' as they had very little direct dealings with them. The LA supported our argument for closer working between SLT, the Educational Psychology Team and the PVI sector. I was then able to arrange for members of both teams to jointly present some of the sessions of the SENCO award with me. As part of the course, I also instigated visits for the SENCOs to spend some time visiting a Special School. This was because the majority of SENCOs across Liverpool had never visited specialist provision before, as mainstream and specialist provision has always been very separate. Yet SENCOs are responsible for making referrals and advising parents on which special school placement their child may need.

Due to the nature of the accreditation, there were particular targets and outcomes to meet, but even so, it was still possible to adopt relational ways of working and encourage closer

partnerships between the SENCOs on the course, leading to the achievement of the qualification. Impact could be evidenced in terms of the knowledge, understanding and increased levels of *confidence* the course had on the SENCOs involved. There were many examples of positive feedback about the Award, such as this one from Leanne, a newly appointed SENCO:

*Since beginning this course, I have gained so much confidence as a practitioner and as a SENCO. I have reflected on my own practice and questioned myself. I have questioned outside agencies that I would have been once too scared of talking to.....At the beginning I thought I would be given a stack of information about disabilities, special needs, and forms to fill in to get children help and support. How wrong I was, but in the most positive way. Not only have I been given a stack of knowledge and advice but the confidence in myself as a SENCO. I now know that I and others are more than capable of making a difference for the children with SEN and improving their learning and I understand that we are all learning together- the child, the parents, the Health Visitor, and that I am also part of that too.*

Leanne: Feedback on SENCO Course March 2015

Leanne's comment meant a great deal to me because it revealed the shift in Leanne's belief about herself, her recognition of her value in the lives of children with SEND, she said that she had "the confidence in myself" and she *knew* she was capable of making a difference. This was such an important thing, and one to which I was proud to have contributed.

Outwardly, everything seemed to be going well for me at the LA. The 'SENCO Award' was receiving much praise within the council, and the 'Step-up for Two's' project, achieving so much.

However, internal differences and difficulties were making it impossible for me to continue working for the QIO team. After much thought and with heavy heart, I resigned from my post. I made the decision because of the toxic atmosphere that had developed, one which challenged my beliefs and values, which I knew I had to remain true to. Later, it came to my notice that School Improvement Liverpool, were receiving funding from the National Association of Special



Educational Needs (NASEN), to work with them to use the “*Liverpool Award for Early Years SENCOs*” as a basis for developing the National Early Years SENCO Award. Since the 2001 SEND Code of Practice (DfES 2001) had come into force, I had been greatly troubled by the ‘gap’ in requirements and expectations for SENCOs in schools compared with those in the PVI Sector, when it is the same SEND Code and the same EYFS Framework, indeed the same children and families we are working with. I was pleased then, that at last, the need for early years SENCOs to have a nationally recognised qualification had come to fruition.

#### 9.4.2 RIPPLE

The period of time after leaving the LA was a difficult one for me to adjust to. I needed to find a way to finance myself and family, and so I began a new career as an independent early years consultant. I was fortunate to secure work with other LA’s to work on early years SEND training for a while, but I wanted to find a way that I could develop practitioner led inquiry in other contexts. RIPPLE, an acronym- ‘Research Informing Pedagogy and Practice by Practitioner Led Enquiry’ was an attempt to do this:



#### 9.4.3 The Scottish Context

I was given the opportunity to work with an organisation in Scotland who had secured funding from a large LA, to deliver ‘Early Learning and Childcare Training’. The LA had assigned groups of schools and ‘private provider nurseries’ to ‘Collaboratives’, who met together each half term. Over a period of 18 months (January 2016- July 2017), my work would involve the development of the Collaboratives as well as providing some training courses. I was keen to move away from the ‘expert’ model and, as far as I could, adopt collaborative and participatory approaches. At the end of each training course, the participants were given an action research proforma to

support action planning and a plan/do/review approach back in their school or setting. The aim was for the practitioners to share their developments with others in the staff team, and that this would form the basis for further discussion in the meetings of the Collaboratives. Some examples of initial inquiry questions which were established during the training were:

‘How can I change the way I observe children to incorporate schema?’

‘How can I support individual children’s schemas through weekly planning and work with parents to support their child’s learning?’

‘How can I help parents understand more about young children’s play and learning?’

There were 10 Collaboratives, with the aim of developing joint thinking and strategies across schools and settings in order to improve practice, with a particular request from the LA to ‘ensure learning readiness particularly for the most vulnerable children’. It was agreed that we would support leaders and practitioners individually and collectively, to engage in practitioner inquiry-based learning at school/setting level in order for them to account for the impact of any changes made. Action planning took the form of the ‘Researching Own Practice Proforma’.

- What is my concern and why am I concerned?
- What can I do about it?
- What is my inquiry question and what actions will I take to instigate change?
- How will I know the impact my actions are having? How does this relate to ‘improved outcomes’ and how will I know?

The aim of this process, which surprised me at first, reflected the enquiry approach to improvement that was being encouraged by Scottish Governmental Policy. The policy highlighted the hope that such a way of working would enable schools and settings to:

...look inwards to analyse their own work, reflect on what they are actually providing, then make adjustments to make the provision better for children’s learning. At the same time, look outwards to find out more about what is working well for others locally and nationally, and look forwards to gauge what continuous improvement might look like.

(Education Scotland 2016:3)

Establishing the Collaboratives as ‘learning communities’ and forums for collaborative working, would be new to the schools and settings. It was a huge task! Some Collaboratives found working together more natural than others, some were enthusiastic, some less so. Enquiry based learning was likewise greeted with mixed responses. It was being encouraged in policy, as it demonstrates many of the features of highly effective practice outlined in *‘How Good is Our Early Learning and Childcare?’* where practitioner enquiry and engagement in professional dialogue are specifically mentioned.

Leaders at all levels in our setting promote and support innovation, creativity and practitioner enquiry. Practitioners continually reflect on and develop their practice as part of the setting’s commitment to improvement.

(ibid:3)

A major assumption underpinning the work I was doing within the Collaboratives was as previously, that those living and working with children on a daily basis both hold and create valuable understandings in relation to knowing what is required to improve the learning and wellbeing of children. The Collaborative meetings offered support for professional development through action research. The emphasis was on understandings generated from practice. New learning and theory were introduced, and participants were encouraged to make links and draw upon previous training they had attended. The work carried out within the Collaboratives would be in response to the themes that emerged from the various pedagogical discussions in the group meetings. Taken for granted assumptions were explored in a collaborative context to consider new ways of working and learning together. In summary work in the collaboratives aimed to:

- Establish each collaborative as a ‘learning community’ each with their own identity, exploring themes that matter at a local level.
- Instigate pedagogical discussion, providing support and challenge.
- Provide opportunities to learn with and from each other.
- Open up possibilities for improved practice and new ways of working - What can I do in my setting to instigate change?
- Gather qualitative evidence of the difference the changes have made to individual children and groups of children and their families- How will I know the changes I have made have had an impact?

My work in the project supported members of the collaborative to critically engage with current research, policy and professional guidance, offering sustained involvement with an improvement priority identified by individuals (their research question) and articulation of their actions (their research stories). By individually researching their own practice and sharing findings within the collaborative context, the practical, situational knowing of the practitioners was at the foreground, and the complexities of practice acknowledged, so that a shared sense of working together to improve the experience of children and families did develop.

All of the Collaboratives visited were positive about the collaborative approach and were keen to share their views.

*Being part of the Collaborative was a very positive experience. I felt that my thoughts and ideas were valued, and I could contribute. The schools were enlightened with regard to all the work done here [private nursery] with our children and families. I felt relaxed and welcomed, our research stories helped us focus on the connections between us, not what separates us. We have so much to learn from each other.*

Manager: Private Partner Nursery.

Beliefs and values about what matters most for children were the starting point for the all the work done, and the aspirational goal of ‘making Scotland the best place in the world for children to grow up in’, was deconstructed and explored to determine its meaning for each of us in our own contexts. A shared sense of the significance of the Early Years was a real driver for the passion that existed, to ensure that practice and provision was the best it could be.

Across all the groups there was recognition that

- Children should be viewed as powerful and competent learners and that they are given opportunities to develop their independence.
- The importance of the adult role in order to ‘tune into’ the individual needs of each child.
- The importance of the nature of adult-child interactions to support learning.
- Understanding of the holistic needs of the child and of working in partnership with parents
- Tackling the impact of poverty and social injustice.

### 9.4.5 A Nurturing Space to Develop Leadership Capacity

Consulting with the teachers, practitioners and leaders in the Collaboratives, valuing and listening to their perspectives revealed much about the complexities and challenges they faced. Whitaker (1998) argues that the essence of effective leadership is helping people to be as effective as they themselves would like to be. The work across the groups involved supporting the practitioners to release their talents and abilities from self-restriction and encourage them through positive attitudes and behaviours, which Whitaker identifies as 'leadership nutrients':

- ✓ Being valued
- ✓ Being encouraged
- ✓ Being noticed
- ✓ Being trusted
- ✓ Being listened to
- ✓ Being respected.

Working in this relational way, helped to foster self-esteem, confidence and commitment to improvement. Against a backdrop of great change and financial restriction, similar concerns across all the groups were being expressed which the practitioners felt were having a negative impact on the work they were carrying out. The common concerns were:

- **Impact of job cuts on staffing levels and quality of staff-** contracted hours, management covering in classes and competing priorities restricting time available to come out of school to attend meetings and courses.
- **Implications of 600 hours** – nursery staff no longer able to attend staff meetings. Less time to build relationships with parents.
- **Challenges of engaging and involving parents**
- **Education vs Care-** the role of nurture and understanding the child's needs whilst still maintaining high expectations for them.
- **Pressure to formalise learning too soon.**
- **Increasing numbers of children with Additional Support Needs.** Little support for working with children on the autism spectrum.
- **Language Delay and Early identification** – Low levels of language on entry. Is this because of a speech language and communication need or delay? How do we know the difference?
- **Transition** and enrolment

However, there was also recognition of the potential of personal agency and a commitment to getting it right for the children despite the challenges. One teacher's comments prompted much discussion within the group:

*We cannot change anyone else; we can only change ourselves and our relationship to the issue. What can we do? What do we want to create? What do we value and believe for the children we work with? Motivation and inspiration to change comes from within- the staff!!!*

Primary School Teacher

It was good to see that some of the Collaboratives were successful in ensuring that their Private Partner Nurseries attended their meetings and when this happened their contribution enhanced the experience and brought new perspectives and deepened understanding. For example, in one Collaborative, two private partner nurseries were regular attendees and one headteacher noted that working more closely with them had influenced the school's plans for improving their transition programme.

*Since last year we have met as a Collaborative and then as individual school members to review and improve our practice. We listened carefully to the ideas and suggestions generated at the meetings and took note of the practice from other establishments that we found to be of value. It was really worthwhile having colleagues from the private and ASN [Additional Support Needs] sector as often their ideas were the most inventive.*

Primary School Headteacher

Establishing an action inquiry is a process and requires a commitment on behalf of those attending, to engage with it and, ideally, to come to each meeting to build on the learning from the previous time. In the project, there were practical barriers to this happening and responses were on a continuum, with people and groups engaging at different levels. However, the research stories that were shared captured some innovative and creative responses. An example from a teacher in a Special School can be seen in \*\*Appendix Seven.

There were many challenges and several disappointments too, from which I was also able to learn. The initial idea of generating inquiry questions with the practitioners at the training sessions and then sharing them at the Collaboratives, very rarely happened. Those that attended the training courses were not the same as the ones who attended the Collaborative meetings. It was mainly managers and senior staff who attended those. So, the intended links between training and discussion of the inquiry questions did not occur. It also highlighted how developing a learning community is a very difficult process. It does not happen just because the organiser arranges it or wants it. Even when people do attend, it takes a while for trust to develop, where everyone's opinions are respected and valued; the conditions have to be right. I knew from my past experiences, that one can only **invite** people to become a part of a learning community. It has to be their choice, they have to feel invested, being able to believe in the process of working with others in order to establish relationships and together create a mutually safe and trusting space. Forming such a community of learners is essential for practitioner led inquiries to develop and be collectively reflected upon. It is through dialogue and reflection with others, that new ideas can be tested out, and new knowledge created.

#### 9.4.6 Returning to Liverpool

From the start of my research inquiry, there have been very many changes at individual, setting and LA levels. Over the last few years, since leaving the LA, I had been contacted by many settings to ask if I would work with them. I supported a large early years department in a school who wanted to use an inquiry based approach to improving their outdoor space. I was involved in a DfE funded project with a maintained Nursery to use practitioner led inquiry with early years SENCOs. All of this work I was grateful for, and I was pleased to be in Liverpool again, and free of the restraints I had been working under as a QIO. Now I was more able to use participatory approaches, ones that were in tune with the holistic and organic ways of working that I believed in.

I wondered if it would be possible to establish a network of people who were willing to explore how to develop a closer, more dynamic and mutually informing approach to practice, in ways that value the role of those who work directly with children as holders and creators of knowledge. Would it be possible to establish a 'learning community' and for us to work together to do just that? After sending out invitations, a small group of 7 interested practitioners who had been involved in the first and second phases of the research was formed. There was no funding for the project, they chose to come. One setting had a meeting room which they were happy for us to use. We started to work together, meeting every 6 weeks. However, for many, finding time to attend was challenging. The group, especially those from the PVI Sector, because of pressures of funding, were finding it difficult to cover staff in order to be released. This meant that it was only those who lead and managed provision who could come. If a staff member was sick or was needed elsewhere, the manager had to stay in the setting. These practical barriers did impact on the work we were doing. Those who attended clearly wanted to come and found it worthwhile. They told me that the time we shared together was important. One of the group, an Early Years Leader in a primary school explained:

*I really look forward to our meetings. It helps me connect to the thinking and issues that matter to me. I feel inspired and refreshed but when I return to school, I sometimes feel overwhelmed by all that I have to do. It's like I have two hats and when I go back to school, I have to wear the one that I don't like as much. There is so much pressure now to 'prove' how we are narrowing the gap. How can I bring the understandings and thinking that we talk about, back into school in a way that satisfies what I am required to do?*

Gina: 'Born for Life' Group

This was a tension, one that all of us recognised; the tension of wearing 'two hats' and playing the 'assessment game' (Basford & Bath 2014), finding precious time being taken up with bureaucratic processes instead of spending time with the children, or feeling under stress that



you are just not doing enough, concerned that you are taking time out to reflect and discuss, rather than stay behind and write up whatever needs doing.

As soon as we touch upon the question of participation we have to entertain and *work with* issues of power, of oppression, of gender; we are confronted with the limitations of our skill, with the rigidities of our own and others' behaviour patterns, with the other pressing demands on our limited time, with the hostility or indifference of our organizational contexts.

(Reason 1994:2)

Such issues cannot be ignored, they have to be recognised, confronted and worked with. Being together, discussing the challenges, describing the complexities involved in practice, the uncertainties, all these are part of the inquiry itself:

.... problematising issues and engaging with them; questioning what is happening, and asking how it might be improved. This then involves asking questions about the conditions that are allowing the situation to be as it is and finding ways of changing the conditions.

(McNiff 2010: 32)

Our learning community not only provided opportunities for critical reflection and learning, but it was also a nurturing space, one that provided support and that was sustaining, allowing us to connect to our values and beliefs about children and early childhood. What was clear, was that those engaged in researching their own practice, recognised the power they held to instigate change from the grassroots up, from the inside out, finding alternative ways to challenge change imposed from the top down or from the outside.

We wanted others to join us and see the benefits (and challenges) of working this way, and to think of ways to encourage more practitioners to carry out practitioner- led inquiries for themselves. It was agreed an event would be organised which would be open to teachers, early years practitioners, leaders and academics, to provide an opportunity to share what we are doing, how we were coming together, using and contributing to research in order to improve the experience of children in schools and settings. I agreed to organise it and had much help and support from the others, with each contributing their 'research stories' in different ways. I arranged for speakers from Liverpool and beyond to come along. For example, the deputy

leader of the 'Development and Research Centre' of a North London teaching school, talked about how they facilitated learning through developing professional learning communities. The day-long Conference took place in June 2018 and was called '*Quality, Research and Professional Practice in the Early Years*'. Just over 50 people attended. It was the first time anything like this had been done in this way in Liverpool. The aim of the conference was captured in the invitation flier:

This innovative Conference provides an opportunity for teachers, early years' practitioners, leaders, and academics to explore how schools and settings are working together, using and contributing to research in order to improve the experience of children in their care. Hear from those who are involved in research at a 'grassroots' level through practitioner-led inquiry, and their work to bring theory and practice closer together and how it is being used to inform quality practice. Join in with the discussions about 'quality', a term often used, but what exactly is it? How do those who work in early years' settings come to know how to be quality professionals? Find out how groups of schools and settings have come together in professional learning communities, to learn with and from each other, embedding an inquiry- mindset in their work with children and families; enabling them to articulate their pedagogical approaches with passion and confidence.

The day was a great success, and afterwards many practitioners contacted to me to find out more or to see whether anymore 'groups' were being set up. Unfortunately, I was unable to progress with their interest. I was having health problems and needed to go into hospital. It took a long time until I was fully recovered. For a while, everything I had done had come to a standstill. The learning community that had only just begun, did not continue. The potential and possibilities of what we were doing seemed to evaporate. People had busy lives, and as the instigator and facilitator of the learning community, with me not there, the group disbanded in the hope that one day, we could start again.

## 9.5 A 'Concrete Practice of Freedom'

I returned to writing my thesis. This has given me time, as a researcher should, to reflect deeply about the whole course of my research journey. My research involved the integration of three strategies of inquiry (Reason and Torbert 2001; Reason and McArdle 2004; Reason and Bradbury 2007.) I have concentrated mostly in the previous chapters on second person research, the I><We. However, from the onset, I have been continually engaging in first person research - the I of the inquiry, reflecting on my stance, my choices, my awareness, my practice, in an on-going process of 'becoming aware' (Marshall 2016). This means to accept, as Marshall highlights, that "this is necessarily provisional, ever incomplete work" (ibid:8), 'weaving between inner and outer arcs of attention' (Marshall 2001), acknowledging that it is not possible to give a full account but that this "does not absolve us from integrating critical reflection into our work, in order to give some sort of account." (Marshall 2016:8).

I recalled 'embracing the struggle' before I left the LA - how through my research and reading, Foucault's work on governmentality as a vehicle for power, provided me with understanding, and a new way to conceptualise what I was experiencing. Ball (2016) explains "The issue is one of recognition of and engagement with relations of power" and I saw how I, the individual, is "the site of power where it is enacted or resisted" (ibid:1131). I was not powerless; "I" was the point of contact between self and power, and the site where there is "a struggle over and against what we have become, what it is that we do not want to be" (ibid: 1143), and in this place the struggle can begin to be worked out. Ball describes "the activity of the subject within a field of constraints, crafting or recrafting one's relation to oneself and to others" (ibid: 1135). I thought about what I had been doing, my work to support practitioners to carry out practitioner-led inquiry and articulate their theories of practice, creating knowledge in collaboration with others. Wasn't this "both critical work, destabilising accustomed ways of doing and being, and positive work, opening spaces in which it is possible to be otherwise."? (ibid).

Now, facing the possibility that I would never return to work, never be able to pick up the pieces, Stephen Ball's analysis of Foucault's ideas once again, enlightened me. This gave me the strength and confidence to write as I do; to lay my passion, desire and hope bare, open to criticism.

For this, the writing of my thesis, is the 'politics of self', self-constitution as an on-going process. It is not passive but active concrete action, "it is an agonism, a process of self-formation through engagement." (Ball 2016: 1135)

That is, not a going back but a going beyond that involves experiments with limits and with transgression; thinking about how one is now and how one might be different. In other words, this is the care of the self, the work of the 'politics of the self', a continuous practice of introspection, which is at the same time attuned to a critique of the world outside: 'critique is the movement through which the subject gives itself the right to question truth concerning its power effects and to question power about its discourses of truth. Critique will be the art of voluntary inservitude, of reflective indocility'.

(Foucault 1997: 386)

My critique is real, not imagined. Making my account public in writing this thesis, is indeed one of 'reflective indocility' whereby, in the reconstitution of the self (myself), I give myself 'the right to question power about its discourses of truth' and offer an alternative narrative. A narrative that refuses the acceptance of a deficit view which sees early years practitioners as lacking, that they do not have the depth of knowing needed to provide well for children. The effect of such a view, is draining from them the courage to believe in themselves and their ability to try new approaches in their own particular contexts that they know as important, to notice the difference they make for their children and families, to value their role. Through my research inquiry, I have come to recognise that my part is as a facilitator of this process, whereby, working collaboratively with early years practitioners in a learning community, supports them in critical reflection - of themselves, their practice and the context in which they are situated, opening their minds to potential and possibilities, and of recognising that they have the power to instigate change from the grassroots. Through practitioner- led inquiry, they can take ownership of their practice, account for their actions and improve what they do. In so doing, they become creators of knowledge.

Peter Reason (2022:2) in a personal memoir to celebrate the life and work of John Heron, explains how Heron “argued for an inquiry model centred on the self-directing person in mutual relations with others in a self-determining community” explaining that by necessity research is:

an ‘original creative activity’ and so cannot be encompassed by the deterministic assumptions of orthodox research; and further, that all persons have a political right to be involved in the creation of knowledge that purports to concern them.

This reflects my belief, that everyone has a right to take responsibility for generating knowledge about their own life and their own practice.

### 9.5.1 Transformative Possibilities

For Freire, dialogue is at the heart of emancipatory practice. Freire’s work and ideas have been a source of inspiration to me, and during the writing of this thesis have helped me to recognise that the way I have chosen to work with the early years practitioners is deeply political. When thinking about what early childhood may mean, Vandenbroeck (2021:15) describes how engaging with Freire’s ideas, goes beyond searching for technocratic solutions but entails having a “respect for ideology, dreams and utopias, for what Freire called *untested feasibilities*”.

For to participate in a productive dialogue with Freire is to become involved in a cultural politics which is committed to the belief in the transformative possibilities of willed human action, both individual and collective.

(ibid)

Inspired by Freire, and engaging in critical reflection has strengthened my belief in the transformative possibilities of collaborative action research and enhanced my desire to advocate for ways of supporting the professional development of early years educators, to include ‘transformative possibilities’ whereby they are enabled and supported through collaborative learning, to perceive and value themselves differently, recognise the significance

of their capacity as knowledge creators and the influence they have on the lives of young children.

Freire's theories of liberation and oppression developed out of his work with people in the poorest regions of Brazil, focusing on adult literacy and social change. Freire (1998) criticised the 'banking model' of education which relied on transmission of knowledge from facilitator to participant with students passively 'receiving' knowledge deposited by those that teach them.

The more students work at deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of the world.

(Freire 1970:60)

He saw the banking model of education, as a method to dominate and assimilate learners in powerful ideologies and as a means by which learners "distrust their own experience, ability, wisdom intuition and transformative powers" (Papatheodorou 2009:10). In Freire's programmes, 'educators and educatees' formed '*culture circles*', sitting down together to talk about what their lives were like and how to overcome the obstacles that stood between them and how they wanted their lives to be. Through a series of dialogues, 'educators and educatees' would both be liberated, as Denis Goulet explains in the introduction to Freire's book '*Education for Critical Consciousness*' (Freire, 1974: ix)

Education in the Freire mode is the practice of liberty because it frees the educator no less than the educatees from the twin thralldom of silence and monologue. Both partners are liberated as they begin to learn, the one to know self as a being of worth...and the other as capable of dialogue in spite of the strait jacket imposed by the role of educator as one who knows.

Such insight resonated with me as it captured much about what motivated me to begin this inquiry, where I was the 'educator' positioned as expert 'delivering training' to early years practitioners ('the educatees') about whom a deficit narrative existed. Freire's idea of 'cultural circles' has been re-invented through the development of a collaborative learning space, where all those involved are co-subjects and co-researchers, engaging in dialogue and learning with

and from each other; sharing our research stories, articulating our theories of practice, and creating new knowing. In this way as Vandenbroek (2021:16) so eloquently highlights:

Freire's work can enable (early childhood) teachers to acquire a greater purchase on forms of critical practice that might serve to interrogate, destabilise, and disorganise dominant strategies of power and power/knowledge relations and in doing so envisage a means of enlisting pedagogy into the construction of a contestatory space where radical and plural democracy might begin to take root.

I contend, that by researching our own practice, individually and collectively, early years practitioners did attain a 'greater purchase on forms of critical practice', becoming creators of knowledge, within a supportive learning community where a 'radical and plural democracy' began to emerge; one in which practitioners' knowing was valued and built upon; where their voices were listened to and acknowledged, thereby developing 'useful knowledge', all of which contributed to human flourishing, "the flourishing of persons as self-directing and sense-making agents located in democratic communities and organisations." (Reason, 1998:1).

This chapter summarised how my theory of practice developed as the research inquiry progressed; how my own understandings and assumptions were challenged, as I learnt with and from the practitioners I worked with, whilst I researched into my own practice in order to improve what I did. The elements of a value based process which encouraged and supported practitioners to research their own practice were identified, showing the means by which practitioners created, developed and articulated their theories of practice, and demonstrating how individual understandings developed within a collaborative learning community, influenced the professional context within which we were located. I highlighted how, by adopting a relational epistemology, which adopted relational approaches to professional development in various contexts, I facilitated a process which enabled practitioners to feel a sense of belonging, to feel valued, acknowledged, and confident to contribute. By working in relational ways, and developing a 'community of learners', I argued how a safe context was provided, in which the practitioners felt able to

reveal their feelings and emotions, a place where trust existed, a place for listening and dialogue, where new knowing was created. Finally, I showed how my research has been influenced by the thoughts and ideas of Paulo Freire (Freire 1970;1974) and pointed towards the potential of this way of working to providing an alternative narrative for those working in ECEC (Moss, 2019).



## **Chapter Ten**

### **Conclusion**

“As soon as one no longer thinks things as one formerly thought them, transformation becomes very urgent, very difficult and quite possible.”

(Foucault, 1988:115)

This concluding chapter will summarise the values, ideas, theories, conclusions, and implications of my research inquiry. I outline several of the components which enabled early years practitioners to generate new knowledge about how to create and sustain rich learning environments for young children. I argue that adopting a participative, relational pedagogy, in a process-based way of working, a more life enhancing concept of continuing professional development is embraced; one which develops leadership capacity at an inter and intrapersonal level, thus supporting human flourishing. I consider how others may adopt a similar process in their own contexts, to build dynamic learning communities. I contemplate the implications for future research and how, by encouraging each of the practitioners to research their own practice individually, and then returning together within a collaborative context, the research had at its heart a democratic vision for change. I conclude finally, that it is through individual and collaborative inquiry as a community of learners that new knowledge is created, resulting in changes to practice and provision from the grassroots up; change that is sustainable.

## 10.1 On a quest to find a new way of working- and finding so much more.

My research inquiry began over ten years ago when I worked as a LA teacher advisor for practitioners in ECEC. Large amounts of funding had been allocated to the LA for the purpose of training and development, but the impact of this investment, in terms of sustainable changes made to provision and practice, was limited. I was frustrated by the top-down approaches of the LA, and uncomfortable about being positioned as an 'expert' in early years education. My inquiry began as a quest to explore whether new ways of working with the practitioners could be found, and if, through working collaboratively with them, it would be possible to identify ways that would encourage and support them to become confident to lead developments in their own settings. By using action research and adopting first, second, and third person strategies of inquiry (Reason and McArdle 2004), I strived to find solutions to this. I did not fully comprehend however, how my own thinking and understanding would deepen and develop, as

I began to read and research, as well as learning with and from the practitioners I met and worked with as the inquiry progressed.

The main aim of my inquiry was to explore the essential components of a process which would enable early years practitioners to generate new knowledge about how to create and sustain rich learning for young children. This was encapsulated in my research question when I asked:

**How can I work collaboratively with early years' practitioners to enable them to perceive and value themselves as knowledge creators in order to generate rich learning environments in which children can flourish?**

This question guided my research inquiry throughout, and below I show how my research aims have been met. However, it is difficult, and I would say dangerous, to reduce what has been achieved to an outline of 'essential components'. My inquiry, as indeed the individual inquiries of the practitioners, has been a living, organic, unfolding process, one unique to each of us in our various contexts. As such, the process cannot be used as a recipe, a technocratic solution to improving outcomes for children, or seen as 'key essential steps to achieve the creation of knowledge'. That is not what the research inquiry has been about, or what I set out to do. However, my exploration has highlighted the potential and possibility of others enacting a similar process in their own contexts, to build a dynamic learning community.

My claim is that practitioners, through a process of individually and collectively researching their own practice, were supported and enabled to move beyond being receivers of knowledge, to become creators of knowledge. My original contribution to knowledge shares my own organic and evolving theory of practice about this; explaining how the nature of provision for young children can be developed and continuously evaluated by early years practitioners. My theory of practice is based on a clear set of values, emerging from a participatory worldview, facilitating a relational process, by which early years practitioners can see themselves as knowledge creators, becoming more confident to recognise the value of the work they do; learning to work with children in a way that is in the children's best interests, attuning to their

emotional needs, which forms the basis for a pedagogy that helps them to flourish.

The research has demonstrated how early years practitioners, as part of a participatory, supportive, community, learned to value and draw upon their embodied knowing, becoming confident to develop their practice and instigate change. The collaborative forum fostered a spirit of inquiry and provided a space for dialogue, action, reflection, critical thinking, support, challenge and containment (Heron 1996; Formosino, and Formosino 2012). In this way practitioners were able to articulate and develop their own theories of practice, thus creating 'useful knowledge' which was relevant and significant to the experience and learning of young children in their own settings (Reason 1998; McNiff 2013).

Each component of this process is important, intertwined or entangled with the others, with the relationship between each affecting the other. It is a process that is living, open-ended and unfolding, and must be enacted to be fully understood. As such it is complex and uncertain, but also has the scope and potential to deal with complexity and uncertainty within a supportive structure.

### 10.1.1 Attitude and Changing Relationships

By drawing on my own experience as a teacher, my reading, and my previous experience of practitioner-research, the inquiry began by challenging the dynamics of power, moving away from the hierarchical, top-down approaches to 'quality improvement' employed by the LA, to one which worked *with* the practitioners, inviting them to engage in an action research inquiry. Firstly, I looked closely at my role as both teacher advisor and practitioner-researcher. I undertook first person research, deeply considering how I used my influence, beginning a journey of becoming aware (Marshall 2016). I learned to acknowledge, confront and resolve, the egotistical assumptions that I held, becoming more conscious of the inner world of my thoughts, beliefs and feelings. This was an essential first step, one that is a continuing evolving journey, as new experiences, new contexts and new people are encountered. It involves learning to work respectfully with others, recognising that to truly work collaboratively means,

in Freire's words, becoming "partners in the world in order to name it", to act with humility because at "the point of encounter there are neither utter ignoramuses nor perfect sages; there are only people who are attempting, together, to learn more than they now know." (Freire, 1993:63)

I had observed how practitioners working with very young children had a low status in society, with their work being undervalued. This often resulted in them having low self-esteem and feelings of a lack of self-worth, consequently having little confidence in their ability to contribute; traditionally they are not listened to and are seen as objects to be reformed and improved (Gunter 2012). My research inquiry challenged this discourse. From the beginning, there was a commitment to acknowledge and value the strengths of the practitioners. By choosing to work in a way that resisted the 'expert' model, and the 'banking model of education' (Freire 1970), the research had a social and democratic vision for change. It recognised that we are all learners, co-subjects and co-inquirers, and each of us has valuable knowledge and experience, which by working collaboratively together, can be built upon. The first phase of the research, showed how in the Collaborative Inquiry (CI) a different relationship between all of us began to emerge. The CI provided a forum for "mutual reciprocal engagement" (Ledwith and Springett, 2010: 20), involving a process which valued the skills, knowledge, experience, and competence of practitioners, where each of us were co-equals and co-partners in our inquiry (Heron, 1996).

By working with the practitioners, researching our practice individually and collectively, we engaged in dialogue as we shared our 'research stories'. Dialogue itself is a co-operative activity, which deepens understanding, and contributes to making a difference in the world. In the CI and the *'Step up for 2's Projects'*, it was through engaging with others in a process of dialogue, which led to action and change. By building their own learning within a learning community, practitioners articulated, and developed their own theories of practice, creating new knowledge. Examples of this were captured in chapters five and seven. The practitioner accounts demonstrated how, by working in a way which acknowledged, and built upon the

insights they had, each practitioner's perception of themselves, and of their position and power to influence change, shifted. This was a key strand of the inquiry, which was developed through shared discussion and critical reflection. Two of the research aims were thereby fulfilled:

- To ground the research in the experience of practitioners by involving them in practitioner led inquiry, engaging in critical thinking to facilitate change.
- To research into my practice to improve what I do, by developing my own evolving theory of practice as I engage with others in a process of collaborative inquiry and explore ways in which individual understandings developed within a collaborative context can influence the professional context within which we are located.

#### 10.1.2 An extended understanding of knowing.

A further aim of the research was :

- To revisit ideas of knowledge identifying the essential components which enable early years practitioners working in ECEC to generate new knowledge about how to create and sustain rich learning environments for young children.

This aim was met because the research was participatory and experiential, built upon the experience and knowing of the practitioners. Grounded in my belief that everyone has the right to develop and take responsibility for creating knowledge about themselves and their practice, throughout the research our discussions drew upon various theories and ideas about knowledge, including Heron's 'Extended Epistemology of Knowing' (Heron 1996). However, it was not just cognitive understanding about knowledge that was achieved, it was knowing that was lived and enacted. As our shared inquiries developed, through dialogue, which not only acknowledged but also at times challenged understanding, each member of the group learned

to pay attention to and reflect upon their practice, articulating their personal knowing. By discussing and sharing our stories, a resonance was experienced as we began to recognise and understand the significance of embodied knowledge to our understanding of ourselves and our actions in the world. This contributed to a growth in confidence and a willingness to put new ideas into practice, with practitioners building upon their learning. Many of them described the learning as ‘transformational’, with changes occurring at inner and outer levels. These changes have been sustained many years after the projects finished, as can be seen in the accounts in chapter eight.

### 10.1.3 An unfolding process in a safe and trusting space

The process itself was important. It was open and fluid, where respect and trust were fostered. In this supportive forum, everyone contributed to the learning process. Here barriers and challenges were shared, and failures and struggles listened to and contained. I had never worked in this way with practitioners before. However, by sharing the full range of human emotions with them, I recognised that research inquiry can, and should, create an openness to learning from mistakes; and through emotional connection, help deepen understanding of personal, group and wider relationship issues, leading us to act in ways that make for social justice and human flourishing (Heron 1996; Reason 1998; McLaughlin 2003). Taken for granted assumptions were surfaced and critiqued, capturing a disenchantment with dominant discourses which seek to impoverish the autonomy and creativity of children and practitioners, in a system that is dominated by marketisation, managerialism and control.

### 10.1.4 Participatory and Relational Ways of Working

The importance of having a safe, supportive and enabling learning space was an essential aspect of the process of the inquiry, a forum which was created together. The emphasis was on collaboration inherent in the inquiry process itself, which emerged from a participatory ontology and the adoption of a participatory consciousness, which involves a letting go of the perceived boundaries that construct the self and the perception of difference between the self

and the other (Heshusius 1994). Developing participatory and relational ways of working contributed to an empowering energy for knowing ourselves and others “for making sense of ourselves because of others” (Papatheodorou 2009:14). The practitioners, as their accounts testify, were able to contribute honestly and openly and experienced a sense of belonging, a togetherness, a connected knowing (Ledwith and Springett 2010).

The last of my research aims was:

- To make my account public in a way that has meaning and value for practitioners, leaders of practice, educators and others who are able to influence policy and practice for children in their early years.

This aim is concerned with third person research, and is on-going. I organised two conference events locally, which provided the opportunity for the practitioners to share their inquiries with other practitioners and the leaders of settings from further away. I also shared the story of my inquiry with a wider audience of academics at York St John University, and EECERA and BERA annual research conferences. The writing of this thesis also contributes to the aim. It has been a long time in the making, and has been written for, and in many ways, by the early years practitioners, who contributed so much in terms of their accounts, inquiries and recollections. The aim was for my writing to have meaning and value and value for them and others; my hope is that it does, but it is only they who can make that judgement.

## 10.2 Summary of the Research Findings

By situating the research in the lived experience of practitioners and involving them in action research, early years practitioners gained a sense of ownership over what they were doing, resulting in practitioners creating new knowledge and becoming more confident and able to provide rich and nourishing learning experiences for the children with whom they worked. My inquiry explored how I could improve my practice; and in doing so, I developed and generated a process that used practitioner- led inquiry within a collaborative forum, which led to changes in practice and provision. These changes were sustained long after the projects had finished,



making an experiential difference to the lives of children, families, and the practitioners themselves.

Adopting this approach is an exciting but challenging process, because on so many levels, individually and collectively, many taken for granted assumptions about ECEC, about knowledge, and even the nature of research itself are challenged. As the inquiry progressed, my theory of practice changed and evolved, as I reflected on the actions I had taken and considered the 'potential and possibilities' of using my new understandings to inform future ways of working collaboratively with others in ECEC. Recognising the significance of early years practitioners as creators of knowledge is important. What we think about ourselves defines our potential, the way we choose to research affects our potential, and the way societies think about themselves and the world affects their collective potential (Brew: 2001). By working in mechanistic, hierarchical ways, which focus on individualism, competition and separation, people become distanced from each other and from themselves (Heshusius 1994). Finding ways to support practitioners to connect and feel valued, able to contribute, and have their voices heard is imperative; this is because, my research inquiry has demonstrated a way that the connected nature of the relationship between knower and known, self and other, research and practice, can be acknowledged, which in turn leads to human flourishing.

### 10.3 Implications for future research

If we want to liberate children's potentials in ways that encourage them to creatively express themselves as unique persons and rich social beings, then we have to ensure that practitioners are well equipped and supported in their work to do this. If they do not see the value of their role, if they lack confidence to question and try new things out, then practitioners will become disheartened, and their potential will remain unfulfilled. At a time when the capacity of LA teams to support schools and settings in their work has been significantly reduced, the more necessary it becomes for settings, and those who work within them, to find a means to sustain themselves. By forming local groups, working relationally with early years practitioners, and inviting them to engage in researching their own practice within a supportive collaborative

learning community, enables a forum for inquiry to be established. Small groups of practitioners working together would be able to respond to individual and local concerns, issues, and barriers. It would need a shared commitment to meeting regularly and to engage in practitioner-led inquiry, so ECEC settings would require financial support to enable practitioners to be available and have the time to do this. Research stories would be shared, evaluated and developed in each group. Eventually this could be developed to include a sharing between other groups, contributing to a growing network of practitioners who are more critically aware, learning with and from each other to deepen understanding of their pedagogy, and more confident to articulate and develop their practice. Such an initiative would not be expensive to initiate and sustain. It would, however, require courage to advocate for a different, participative way of working, one that challenges the mechanistic paradigm; one that believes in the potential and possibilities of alternative narratives.

Education has been de-politicised, privatised and marketized, and all of these things erode democracy (Dahlberg and Moss 2005). People have a right to participate and create knowledge about themselves and their place in the world (Heron, 1996). By working together in forums of inquiry, early years practitioners, whose voices have previously remained silenced, can be heard, and new knowledge created and shared.

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## **Appendix One**

## Researching Own Practice Framework

<b>What are my values and why?</b>  What really matters to me? What do I care passionately about? What kind of difference do I want to make?	
<b>What is my concern?</b>	
<b>Why am I concerned?</b>	
<b>What can I do about it?</b>	
<b>How will I know the impact my actions are having?</b>  How does this relate to the experience of the child/children? What evidence will I have?	

Here are some other questions to think about that might help you when starting your research inquiry. We can talk about them together when we next meet:

- ✓ Why did you choose to work with/for children?
- ✓ Tell the story of what matters to you in your work - in terms of your values, how you would like to make a difference, your dreams and aspirations for the children you work with?
- ✓ Can you give an example of some work that you have done with a child that you are particularly proud of?
- ✓ Can you think of anything that would improve your ability to work well for children and their families?



## **Appendix Two**

## **Collaborative Inquiry**

### **‘Learning Contract’**

#### **Confidentiality**

In order for there to be maximum learning and value to be experienced from this project, it is important that we build an atmosphere of trust, where each of us can feel free to talk about our different experiences and feelings in a variety of situations, including naming people and / or organisations. In order to create a context that allows this, we agree that what is said within the group concerning personal/ individual experience is confidential; there will be no sharing of those experiences with others outside of the group, unless there is explicit permission by that person to do so.

Any writing or other output from individuals within the collaborative inquiry will be shared with all group members for comment/ amendments before being disseminated outside of the group.

Any factual information that is spoken about in the group that is universally available, such as changes in legislation, can of course be spoken about elsewhere.

If anyone is in any doubt about the status of confidentiality of a particular issue, they should check with either the whole group, or the individual who spoke about it, before talking about it in any other context.

#### **Constructive feedback**

Critical feedback is an important part of learning. However, in being critical, of either a service or an individual, it is important to think about how to do that professionally, constructively, demonstrating respect, and avoiding being offensive. It is also important to suggest positive ways forward, rather than just focusing on what is ‘wrong’.

#### **Challenge**

Related to constructive feedback – if someone in the group says something that concerns you, or you don’t understand, and you don’t feel it appropriate to raise it immediately in the group, then you should raise it with the person concerned in an enquiring, constructive way after the session. It is important not to allow situations that concern you to lie dormant, as these are likely to have an ongoing negative effect on how you either perceive that person, or the situation they are talking about.

#### **Equality, Participation and Mutual Empowerment**

The equality of all, regardless of role / position is an important principle underpinning the enquiry. Everyone has an equal right to give their opinion in any situation, and that opinion should be listened to and respected. We want everyone to feel able to participate, in the confidence that their contribution is valued.

**Review of Ground Rules**

These ground rules are not carved in stone, and are open to review, modification and addition by any member of the group at any time.

## **Appendix Three**

## Collaborative Inquiry: Anita's Account for the Conference

When I started this enquiry last year, I had no idea what it was all about. All I knew was that it was a way of hopefully improving my practice. It was very different from any of the training courses I had attended before, many of which are not working. For the few that do inform, there are many that are a complete waste of time. For example I attended a training course which I won't name; but it was a full day, and after the initial ice-breaker and background information, we did some hands-on stuff. After lunch we sat for hours watching slide after slide of different settings and how they had implemented this training. Frankly I was bored to death and felt patronised. I have worked in this profession for nine years; I didn't need to sit through a whole afternoon of photographs to get the point.

The enquiry seemed to be the opposite to this kind of training. It talked about practitioners being the experts and having a wealth of knowledge and information. I had never looked at myself and my colleagues in this way before. Childcare workers have always been on the bottom rung of the ladder. We are not given the same respect, or anywhere near the same pay as teachers, for example, and yet we do a job that is equally important. I have (nine?) year's experience as a childcare practitioner and have (NVQ?) qualifications – and yet I earn just (76p?) more than my (22?) year old son who is unqualified and works at McDonalds. When you work in a profession that is under-valued, you start to undervalue yourself.

At one point in the enquiry I wanted to pull out. I didn't see what I could do that would make a difference, but after talking to Janice and Joan, I agreed to stick with it. I was asked to look at my values and what motivated me. I remembered a teacher I'd had in secondary school who had taught me to dive. I was not a strong swimmer; in fact I had only just learned to swim in the summer holidays. I didn't like water and avoided swimming with friends because I lacked confidence. I still remember my teacher patiently sitting next to me on the edge of the pool trying to coax me in. Each lesson she seemed to spend a lot of time just with me (all the others had mastered diving by then). At first I hope she'd just give up: but she didn't. I started diving in from a sitting position and finally I moved further along towards the deep end. Amazingly she never gave up on me. And by instinctively knowing when to gently push me and when to back off, she finally taught me to dive perfectly in the deep end. I have never forgotten the huge sense of achievement I felt on that final day.

I realise now what a fantastic, dedicated teacher she was. I suppose she was one of the influences that brought me to this point.

I think everybody needs to remember one of these experiences from their own past, good or bad, to understand the impact it can have on a child. Because it's these experiences that really shape us into the adults we become. I think that was when I really understood what this project was all about. It's the moment by moment interactions that make the difference. That's what I'll take away from this. That every moment counts. I'm so much more aware now that every word and every action can do so much for a child's self esteem and confidence.

Joan asked me to write something about what I do on a moment-by-moment basis in my work setting. Somehow it turned into a poem. Lots of people gave me positive comments

about it and it was published in a child care journal – it was nice to think that others had valued my opinions.

By taking part in this enquiry my confidence has improved and hopefully this will improve my practice. It's been great to work with a range of practitioners from all over the city and to share our knowledge and Yes, our expertise!!

I suppose all I can do is try to make my setting a safe, happy, nurturing place for all the children who attend. I have now become passionate about communicating to other staff the importance of paying attention and being patient with each child; of encouraging them to understand that how they are 'in this present moment' can make more difference to a child than they might realise: for every moment **does** count.

I feel ashamed to say I have never dived as an adult. I'm still not a great swimmer and avoid it just as I did when I was a child. But the important point is that because of the influence of the teacher, who was patient and cared about me, I can. If I need to, it's there, and that's all that matters in the end. I can!!

## **Appendix Four**

## Making Sense of the Collaborative Inquiry in my work in as a QIO for the Early Years Foundation Stage.

### **What really matters to me? What do I care passionately about? What kind of difference do I want to make in the world?**

It is my belief that every child is born with great potential and deserves to be given every chance to fulfil it. The reality is however, that children living in poverty and disadvantage are still less likely to do less well at school and in their later life. Since the coalition government came to power, the phrase "*Every Child Matters*" seems to have lost its prominence, however as a LA advisory teacher, working in Liverpool, I continue to ask what this means in our City, where 1 in 4 children live below the poverty line.

Developing a social vision for change is an important driver for my work and is one of the main reasons I am committed to developing high quality early years provision in schools, settings and children's centres because I know that children who do well by age five have a much better chance at succeeding in later life.

This seems particularly pertinent to me when the needs of the group of young children who have learning difficulties and disabilities (LDD) are considered. We know that as a group (a group made up of hundreds of 'unique' children) these individuals are particularly vulnerable to underachievement. Why should this be so? Why should 'special needs' be cited as the reason a child is failing, when so often it is the systems in place that are the real barriers to that child's achievement.

In my role as 'Quality Improvement Officer' I have seen these barriers for myself. I have listened to the child and their family and watched how far too many parents feel they have to fight to get it right for their child. I have seen how children and families have to face ignorance and overcome prejudicial attitudes. I have experienced the frustration of systems and interventions which are difficult to negotiate and access, approaches that are hierarchical and frightening. I also know that in too many Early Years Settings provision and practices are not as they should be and that children with SEND are being excluded not included.

I have also seen how the work of committed Early Years practitioners is too often not valued and goes unnoticed by those in specialist services. Close working partnerships between PVI settings, schools and specialist services that should be linked together in order to effectively support a child are rare.

My passion is to make this better! I want to be able to use my connections and influence in ways I can to provoke change and improved practice at individual, setting and system levels in order to make an experiential difference for these children and their families.

### **What are my values and why?**

Fairness- equality of access to participation and the right to feel you belong.

Mutual empowerment.

Even when the right to participate has been established, there are many reasons why this does not happen. In my work if I am aware that individuals are experiencing disempowerment (children,



practitioners, parents) it is important to me that I take account of that. I am conscious that (particularly because of the work that I do and because of the hierarchical nature of the system in which I work) I need to be aware of how I use the influence I have in ways that are positive. It is very easy in my job to be critical, and focus on what hasn't been done, using accountability frameworks to hide behind. I do not want to work in that way and instead strive to use my influence to enable, not disable, the people I work with.

I want practitioners to be open to learning the skills and understandings they need as well as to have the confidence to participate and feel valued. Over the last 18 months my understanding of the importance of this has deepened and this theme emerged as a very important part of the first phase of the Collaborative Inquiry. By working closely with and listening to numerous accounts of the Early Years Practitioners in a collaborative way, I began to know the practitioners in ways that had not been possible for me before. I was able to listen and not just hear. We each of started learning with and from each other and this proved to be something that was transformational for all of us. Indeed, this continues to grow and develop and this has encouraged me, through some very tough times, to see practitioners empowered through using action research as they strive to improve their practice for the children in their care.

### **What is my concern?**

Despite many initiatives and approaches to support the inclusion of children with additional needs into universal services/mainstream settings, (including hundreds of thousands of pounds being spent on training) there has been very little impact in terms of sustained improvement in practice. The 'gap in achievement' has failed to narrow. Practitioners seem to lack the skills and confidence in meeting the needs of children with SEND in order to understand the very real difference they can make to the child's experience in the setting and the effect this has on the child's longer term outcomes.

'Staff in settings need to have an increased understanding of the principles of early intervention, of how they can identify early difficulties, of how they should respond, and of the role of others.'  
(Grasping the Nettle 2010 p. 9)

Systems to support integrated working at setting and service level are weak and the interface between universal, targeted and specialist levels not fully exploited. Although it is known that effective early intervention works, in Liverpool there is little clarity about how each service can support each other and work together to form 'A Team around the Child'.

'A key to success is understanding that early intervention requires a *re-orientation of the system at all levels*.' (Grasping the Nettle 2010 p.8)

### **Why am I concerned?**

'If you always do what you always did, you always get what you always got.'

Unless practice and provision changes through learning that is *transformational*, with the importance of agencies working in partnership to meet the needs of children and families being recognised, then the impact of 'quality improvement' will be limited and children and families will continue to be treated unfairly. This is when my question about 'Where does change happen?' and 'Who makes it happen?' is very relevant.

In order to develop settings that are inclusive and which meet the needs of disabled children and their families, both 'top down' and 'bottom up' change processes must prevail as they fulfil different purposes. 'Top down' approaches can convey a clear message about expectations and focus for improvement but this alone does not win the 'hearts and minds' of all practitioners or build internal capacity.

From my experience, I have come to understand that inclusive practice is most successfully developed when practitioners work collaboratively, share their practice and learn from what they and their colleagues do well. Change is most effective when there is a sustained professional dialogue between practitioners that listens to and is responsive to the voice of the child and family. In order to improve 'quality of provision', consideration needs to be given to the actual process of learning itself. How does knowledge, or new understandings become embedded in practice? Traditional approaches to 'training' which fail to embrace the principles of andragogy, do very little bring about the changes in practice and provision which are required. CPD is often concerned with content. Practitioners have had access to countless booklets and training that outlines what needs to be done and strategies to do it. However, despite all this investment changes to practice and provision and most importantly the experience of children themselves, does not always follow. The 'how' of change in traditional approaches to CPD is rarely taken account of. I want to develop ways of working with practitioners that enables us to work in meaningful ways that have relevance to everyday practice and ensure that any change is not imposed but grows out of true understanding.

As part of my study for my Masters degree I took part in my first action research project, an experience that was a transformational learning experience for me, in both a professional and personal sense. Creating the opportunity to engage in dialogue in the Collaborative Inquiry, meant acknowledging the differing perspectives that each of us as parent, practitioner or researcher brought. By understanding that everyone's knowledge held equal importance and working together in a spirit of collaborative participation, a deeper understanding of how the provision was experienced by the children and families was surfaced. It was not about any one of us being 'right' and bulldozing their wishes through to achieve a prearranged outcome. Engaging together in dialogue provided the means for us all to be reflective about our own approaches and actions.

Coming together in this way was a new experience for many of us in the first phase of the CI. I believe that engaging in such a process and developing it, is an important way for us to begin to establish the changes to practice and provision across Children's Services that are so desperately needed.

### **What can I do about it?**

I want my work to support the change process and explore not just **where** should change happen but **who** makes it happen. To do this I feel I have to grapple with power structures within the existing systems, and challenge the perceived wisdom of traditional ways of working. I am striving to use my influence as a member of the QIO team, to encourage the development of joined up approaches by working to establish a network of people who are willing to explore how to develop a closer approach to partnership working.

This has to begin with making this explicit to you so that you can understand why I feel that this is integral to my role as QIO who has a particular responsibility for SEN and Inclusion. This in itself is not an easy task in the current context we're in. It is a continuing journey with many barriers to navigate and hurdles to get over. However, it has been by being able to hold firm to my values and beliefs as well as by having the support and encouragement from others to continue and not give

up, that I have felt able to find ways of developing my own living theory in order to improve my practice and make a difference in the ways that I am able to use my influence for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage.

### **What will I do about it?**

- Reflective practitioners and collaborative learning are essential to the process of developing inclusive approaches. Effective practitioners need time and space to develop their thinking and to learn from each other.

For many years the LA has provided numerous training events for Sencos in PVI Settings in order to support the development of inclusive practice. Whilst these have been well-received, the impact of such an investment rarely results in whole setting improvements. It is still very much the case that 'SEN issues' are seen as the 'Senco's job' and the practitioners in the room lack confidence in their skills for early identification and support of children with LDD. Supporting and challenging settings to develop strategic approaches to inclusion was a focus for the work of the Area Senco team and was intended to be one of the main purposes of the DIP-TAC Groups. However, since the recent devastating cuts to LA budgets, this support no longer exists and the collaborative nature of the DIP TAC Groups has been weakened. It is time to challenge this and ensure that Sencos in PVI settings are enabled to do fulfil their responsibilities in the ways that they should. New ways of doing this need to be established and this is why the work and ideas emerging from the second phase of the Collaborative Inquiry are significant. I will use my influence to ensure that as far as possible the 'voice' of the practitioners themselves can be heard in order to meaningfully inform the support that will be organised by the LA.

- A secure and shared understanding of what effective inclusive practice 'looks like' is essential for practitioners to be able to reflect and develop their practice and for those with a leadership position within the setting, to be able to help them to do this.

The establishment of closer working partnerships between specialist and universal services is essential to the effectiveness of early intervention for children 0-5. This is a particular concern when children make the transition from nursery and into school. It is widely recognised that this is known to be a time when children and families are especially vulnerable. However, the work and understandings of the practitioners who know that child best are barely recognised and there seems to be a perception by many at school level and in specialist services, that the 'real' work of early intervention does not begin until a child enters school. This attitude not only results in a poorer experience for the child but erodes any confidence in their professional role that practitioners from the PVI Sector may have. They become discouraged, with some Early Years Practitioners feeling the work they do is of little consequence and so a downward spiral is set up which can mean that some end up saying 'Why bother?'.

The work of the Collaborative Inquiry is proving to be a powerful 'antidote' to that and by working with others and sharing experiences all of us who are involved become encouraged to carry on.

- Deepening the dialogue with parents about their child is a key factor in developing inclusive practice. Working closely with parents not only enriches our understanding of the child but can provide penetrating evidence about what works well in a setting and what does not.

Early Year's Practitioners are well aware of the need to develop positive relationships with parents; however, feedback from both practitioners and parents reveals that this does not always work as it should. The reasons for this being numerous and complex. It is clear that many practitioners lack

confidence to talk honestly and openly with parents when a child is experiencing difficulties. There are often challenges in establishing a 'two way' flow of information, valuing and using the knowledge a parent has about their child.

Practitioners are often unsure about 'what happens next' should a child be referred to specialist services. Some practitioners have yet to understand that when a child is diagnosed with having 'special needs' that often the parents need support too.

In Liverpool we have many examples of good practice in this area. Listening to parents who have experienced both positive and negative approaches and hearing their stories can be a powerful catalyst for change.

Working with some practitioners involved in the Collaborative Inquiry, a DVD was produced which contained filmed examples of good practice. It captured the real life experience of several parents and families. The narration and accompanying notes encourage critical self-reflection. It is intended that this will provide the means to enable practitioners to examine their practice and explore the answers to the question 'How can I improve my practice?'

- Monitoring and self- evaluation needs to be a distributed process involving all practitioners. It should be inquiry-based and inform continuing professional development. CPD is a continuing journey, a process, not a series of isolated events.

In the most effective settings, self evaluation is something that needs to be undertaken at individual, team and organisational level. Building leadership capacity requires not only 'top down' approaches such as that adopted by EQISP and ECERS.

More importantly I believe is that there also needs to be recognition that it is the moment by moment interactions between child and practitioner that have the most effect on a child's well-being and outcomes. 'Bottom up' approaches, with practitioners who are encouraged to be critically reflective and whose experience and knowledge is valued are essential for transformational and sustainable change to occur. In June 2011 a conference was organised at Hope University by the practitioners who were part of the Collaborative Inquiry. It was called '*The Professional Work of Early Years Educators- Every Moment Counts*'. This event was well attended and very well received. It demonstrated the commitment, skills and understandings that those who work with our youngest children have. Most significantly there was also in evidence a level of confidence amongst the practitioners that had been, up until then, hidden. All of us who were involved in the first phase of the CI want to share our learning more widely and encourage others to join the group so that they too can begin to research their practice and find out in ways that matter to them, how they can really 'make a difference' for the children they work with.

Through researching our own practice and identifying the ways we can use our influence to improve provision and practice for young children with SEND, a group of committed Early Years Sencos and setting managers as well as an EYFS Lead and a speech and language therapist have agreed to take part in another Collaborative Inquiry where we will look particularly at how to improve the initial training for Sencos who are new to the role.

## References

- C4EO Report (2011) *Grasping The Nettle: Early intervention for children, families and communities*. NCB. London.

## **Appendix Five**

Role-Play written by Caroline: Difficult Conversations

Emma thinks...

*I'm scared and worried about what Mum's reaction will be....*

*I'm concerned about Zac. He's not reaching his milestones.... He doesn't interact at all – he's in a world of his own.*



Emma says...

Oh Hi Mrs Williams, I am so glad that you have come in today. Zac is having a lovely time in the water area.

Mum thinks...

*I'm absolutely shattered. I haven't had a good night's sleep in nearly three years now. Zac has temper tantrums and I don't know why he keeps kicking off.... I'm really under pressure from work- my boss has given me a final warning. I can't stay long... No-one seems to understand what I'm going through..... I'm sure they don't like me here.*



Mum says....

Oh hi, yes it's nice to be here.

Emma thinks...

*She doesn't really want to be here  
She's not really interested in what I have to say about Zac....  
Our behaviour management strategies aren't working*



Emma says...

I've got Zac's learning journey file here, I thought you might like to see it.

Mum thinks....

*I'm feel guilty and sad that I have missed out on seeing Zac do all those things.*



Mum says....

Oh look at him. He's having such a lovely time.

Emma thinks...

He's good at one to one because he won't let any other children near him and besides they're scared of him.



Emma says...

Yes he really loves playing in the water tray and with the trains. That's the first thing he goes to in the mornings.

Mum thinks...

I'm glad Emma is being so positive about him.... She must like him.... If I could just get him to sleep, he might not lose his temper so much because he wouldn't be overtired all the time



Mum says....

Looks like he likes playing with you. He's giving you a big smile there!

Emma thinks...

Just do it, just say it Emma, just tell her, I have to do it for Zac. Here goes.....



Yes, he can be so lovely at times. But we are worried about how often he loses his temper and lashes out.

Mum thinks....

You told me it was ok- that his outbursts were because he was teething or that he was tired! What are you going to tell me now ?!!



Mum says....

Err.. oh gosh.... Really? But you said he was ok, that he was lovely. He's still so little.

Emma thinks...

She's not listening, she's just coming up with excuses...  
.....Oh no! She's blaming me!



Emma says...

Yes, but he's obviously struggling, he's finding it hard to fit in sometimes.

Mum thinks....

What are you telling me?  
He's not normal?.....  
He's a bad child?....  
There's something wrong with him?  
Something is WRONG!!!!!!.....



Mum says....

So, what are you telling me?  
What do you mean?

Emma thinks...

I'm sure Zac has special needs, he's  
so hard to manage and I've tried  
everything. I don't know if what  
I'm doing is right....  
I can't cope and I need help too.  
It will be best if Caroline deals with  
this.



Emma says...

I think it would be good if you  
could speak to Caroline. Or  
Laura, our special needs co-  
ordinator. They'll be able to  
help.

Mum thinks...

**SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS!**  
Zac has special needs!.... I need to get  
out of here, I need space to  
think..... I need to be with Zac.  
What must Zac be going through?  
I haven't been there for him!  
What's going to happen to him?



Mum says...



Emma thinks...

Did she hear what I said?  
I can't gauge her reaction....  
She seems angry with me



Emma says...

Are you ok Mrs Williams? Is  
there anything I can do?



Mum thinks...

I need to get out of here!... I need to  
speak to my friend  
I just want to get Zac and take  
him home  
I want everything to be ok.



Mum says....

Yes, no, I'm fine. Sorry.. I need  
to get back to work.

I don't know Laura, what did she say she was, the SENCo?  
How many other people know about this?  
Do they know Zac has got special educational needs before me?  
..... I need to get away and think this through.

## **Appendix Six**

## Transcript of Chloe's reflections on the 'Step up for 2's' Project.

### Power

I was struck by the transfer of power within the group and probably one of the first courses where we'd gone along and the practitioners were given autonomy to develop their own ideas, and there was a divide within the group between people who were being told what to spend their pot of money on and others who were being able to run with their own ideas. And I remember me and Alisa talking about it at that time and saying well no the ideas had to come from her but there was others in the group who were saying ours is being used for new curtains or new blinds which wasn't really part of their idea, and it was just really interesting it was around people given that autonomy within their own setting which was the power of the training really because there was people in that group who had been sent on the course, rather than being invested in the course but you could see them having that gem of an idea and thinking well actually I've always wanted to do develop this but I've never been able to work in that way. So that was really interesting. And I think reflecting on your own setting, thinking where are we now and where do we want to go in small increments so it became something like, because you weren't just going and learning and then never having to revisit, you knew you would have to go back and report back and there was almost camaraderie within between the people who were attending the course to say well what are you going to do, how did you share this?

JDS: As a manager did you find that it helped you back in the setting?

Yes well we were already working in a way that was about sharing knowledge, we already did CPD, we cascaded that across the setting so everybody benefitted from it. But this was something different because this was a triangulation between the 3 courses so each person became the expert in that field and that was also really powerful because for Alisa to become the expert in the environment and other practitioners were going to her and you could just see the transfer of knowledge and skills and well what do you think about this? And everybody coming together and adding their own dimension to it, and then going back and sharing it, so it wasn't just about what I can do in my room it was more global than that, it was what I can do in my nursery and actually you were also thinking what are we doing across Liverpool because I think it was 10 settings was it, 16-20 people in each cluster, so it was quite a large group and you could see what they were doing and getting to know each other more, so it didn't feel competitive, but it felt as if you were supporting each other, so there was an element of well have you tried this or problem solving, well we haven't got, we can't do that because and for us free flow, indoor/outdoor we just couldn't do that so the 'I wonder if' question- so we would go with a seed of an idea and it became a really popular thing to do, you know let's all of us go and think about this one question. I think our first question was I wonder if we all share the same vision and values for our setting. AND WE DID and that was a revelation because just thinking about where we were at that time and

we were preparing for an OfSTED and we hadn't had outstanding at that time, we were a good.

Staff then recognising that they were able to articulate, able to talk about their practice and their confidence to do that and that helped us with OfSTED because with nurseries coming in, when Ofsted came in they were able to talk about what and why they were doing things.

It was almost a mastery matrix, you were one person was being upskilled to be the expert and in early years nobody is recognised as an expert, you might just be the nursery nurse, or you might just be the person who looks after the children, but nobody had ever been recognised as an expert, particularly in a setting that is graduate led, because as our was at that time we were very EYP (Early Years Professional) heavy, so we deliberately didn't send people who were level 6 because we felt at the time we wanted to upskill the people who had skills but just weren't choosing to at that time to go off and do a degree, but they still had those skills and knowledge and understanding. It was about them, cos I am still a firm believer of that you learn 80% of what you teach so in order for them to learn it and to fully embrace it they had to teach it to somebody else, they had to come back but they were completely empowered to go back to say, I've not only learned it, I've then come back and reflected n it in my setting, reflected on it with my peers, and then carried it out and then re-shared it. Because if you remember back, there's not many courses are there or CPD where you can think, well I know exactly where I can get the notes from, I can go to that cupboard now and get them

## Uniform

We always say we miss things like that, they're the ones you remember and it was so long time ago, nearly 10 years ago and you still remember. And it was because of the impact, there was a revelation for us when we were thinking about what we needed to do, and we were doing things quickly and we had gone so far along on our journey of revamping the setting, but there was a conference. We were sitting having lunch and I looked around and we were all in our own clothes and it was at the time that the period of them putting 2 year olds into schools, and I actually felt that there was people on the course who were in their own clothes and people in uniform and it just struck me that we were in the wrong place, that there had been in a uniform was devaluing what we were doing. Because I was going into schools as part of my ITT (Initial Teacher Training) role and seeing the people who were with the very youngest children in their tabards or their polo shirts with the logo on, and then you'd see the teacher and it struck me that when I walked into a room to and I'd look for who the mentor was I'd always look for the person who was in their own clothes, because and they were seen as the knowledge holder whereas the people who were working with our younger children were always in a tabard or a fleece and it felt like there was an imbalance of power around that. And that was when we came with the idea of getting rid of our uniforms.

It was a really, really big thing, I remember that at the time. So we discussed it with the parents, sent a survey out to the parents and we talked to the staff and Sandra said I am going to leave, if you take my uniform away from me what am I gonna wear? So we had to talk her down and we talked to the staff about what it would mean for them. Other

practitioners on the course who we were asking were saying no, your staff will look scruffy in their own clothes, they'll look untidy. But because we wanted to be seen as the educators we needed to inquire a bit more into this. So we put a box in the corridor for parents and the things they were saying were, well one said I want my child to know who is in authority, I won't know who you are, I won't know who anybody is, sometimes you look like hairdressers in your uniforms. Then we put it on Facebook and Rachel rang me ...saying you need to do something this parent has written something on Facebook and he'd said, 'I don't know what you're hoping to achieve by this, you're breaking something that doesn't need fixing, I want my child to come to nursery to learn authority'.

He was saying uniform was seen as authority like a policeman in a uniform, but that's not what we're about and made us go even more, oh no. So I had a knot of anxiety but I reflected on it and when I got back he had actually already been silenced by an ex-member of staff who had moved away who said I'm not a parent, but if it was my child I wouldn't want them to be taught about authority, I'd want them to be loved and cared for and nurtured and to be supported in their learning. And I knew then that I didn't have to address it because Phoebe had addressed it for us and Phoebe hadn't worked with us for 3 years but she knew what we were trying to achieve and she hadn't been on that journey with us and it wasn't something we were trying achieve and we weren't trying to be controversial, it just felt wrong it just felt like there was something that wasn't right.

Yes it jarred, almost like the scales had fallen from my eyes- I think that Practitioner- led inquiry, helped a process of thinking more deeply and being able to work it through with the staff. Yes that was probably the one that got the most extreme reaction, because Elizabeth Jarman posted it on her Facebook page, and she has lots more followers and I think she got something like 700 comments from all over the country, some were for it and some were venomously against it. But it was the process of talking it through and articulating it and being part of something that was transformational really because you were taking people from a place where they were really comfortable, so if we take Sandra as the extreme, Sandra was going leave and might have gone to work somewhere else, because she would get up in the morning and it was easier for her and she felt comfortable and confident in her uniform, and there was so many things along that journey, so we said we will give it 6 weeks and we'll reflect upon it and I think it coincided with us coming back and feeding back and you could see real change along that time. Sandra went along to a QI cluster at the school improvement office, and it was the first time she had gone out of uniform and so there would have been practitioners on there who knew what we were doing, and so we talked it through and said it will be ok, you go. She said it was half an hour into the course when QIO X said 'oh Sandra, I didn't recognise you, because you're not in your uniform', but she'd been on lots and lots of courses with her and really she should have recognised her, so the uniform was a barrier.

But I think our original question was, and it was tied up with a child who was a quiet child, we refer to them now as quiet children but at the time it was selective mute, and we knew that when she went out of the setting she would talk to us because Lizzy wasn't in her uniform, so our question was is our uniform a barrier to language and communication? So it we had that underlying bit about the perception so it was really 3 fold, so it was the perception of the sector but also was it a barrier. And it was Lydia's Mum who also wrote us

a big paragraph saying do not come out of uniform, its professionalism. I have chosen this nursery because you're seen as one of the best in Liverpool, it's about professionalism and so we spoke to her and then she wrote us another paragraph saying, now I understand why you are doing it and we weren't just doing it to be controversial or we needed something to change. It was a process of well this is what we are doing for the staff, this is what we are doing for the team, the families, the children. And when we came back to it, it was probably only about 2 weeks it was clear we never going to go back, but it was the negative comments that made us realise we weren't going back, comments about authority, the not knowing who we were.

The 'I wonder if' question made us think more deeply about our relationships with parents- we are all part of a family, whether we are a parent or a practitioner. We ask parents so many questions about their family circumstances, but we weren't sharing anything about ours. It wasn't on equal terms, it has got to be reciprocal. It's hard to remember how different it was before, as this is so much part of how our setting is now. We just assume that when a new practitioner starts with us, you give us a family photograph, but some people think this is very strange. 'I couldn't work there if you wanted to know so much about me and my family'. So that is why we need to return to it, revisit our journey and explain why we work in this way. So we still use the 'I wonder...' board, if we want to make changes, or if we want to revisit something. So after Covid, we revisited the question 'I wonder if parents know what our setting is like and understand what the children do when they are here?' Things had changed so much, visits were restricted, we were unable to give parents and children as much time for transition visits etc. Doing the 'I wonder if' question really helped to put those values back, re-energised our practice with parents.

## **Appendix Seven**

## Research proforma documenting research story and evaluation of impact.

### **What is my concern? What do I believe and why am I concerned?**

In order to effectively support the learning and development of the children in my class, it is important that I work in close partnership with their parents. Creating opportunities to listen to them and engage in meaningful dialogue, will help me deepen my understanding of the unique needs and behaviour of their child and enable me to share my expertise and understanding with them.

The children attending our school travel each day into school with their escorts, there is not the same opportunity that exists in mainstream schools, for parents to talk with us on an informal basis. Although formal meetings are arranged to meet with parents, we want to find other ways to engage and involve families in order to get to know them better, establish a shared trust and move forward together.

The particular challenges of caring for a child with additional support needs, can be very demanding and many parents can feel isolated and unsupported. I have noticed how many of our parents feel anxious about their child's behaviour for example, and do not realise that they are not the only ones who feel like this. As a school we want to be able to better understand the needs of our parents and try to find ways to work more closely with them. We wonder if we could facilitate better connections between the families who are part of our school community, which may help them to feel less alone and gain support from each other.

Children attending our school come from a large geographical area and a range of different social and economic backgrounds. Different approaches to involve parents in the life of the school have been tried before, with some success, but it is clear that for those parents who may not have had a positive experience of schooling themselves, barriers exist to establishing their trust and engagement. I feel there is more that I can do to develop stronger relationships with parents because I believe this will enable us to support the children more effectively.

### **What is my inquiry question? (How can I.... I wonder if ...)**

How can I increase parental involvement and parental interaction with one another to facilitate trusting relationships in order to better understand and support their child's needs?

### **What can I do about it?**

In the nursery we are developing several different approaches to involve parents more:

- Introduce nursery coffee morning for pm and am parents.
- Stay and play sessions- sensory sessions. Speech and Language therapists are present on some sessions.
- Target parents - involve the keyworker
- Nursery parents now involved in school parent council meetings (so can get to know other parents in the school).

As a staff we reflected on what we could do that would appeal to parents and would give us the opportunity to talk with them about their child in a less formal context to encourage meaningful dialogue.

I want to provide a place where parents can feel 'safe' and be able to talk to me because they trust me with their child and so are more willing to share their hopes and fears. So we introduced



swimming sessions where the parent can come along and see their child and join me as I work with them in the pool.

- Use our pool to develop stronger partnership with parents- give them the opportunity to bring their child along
- Parent gets time slot. I collect them from office. If child is nervous/anxious about water the parent can collect their child from nursery- so parent sees them in class.
- Prepare child- using visual support.
- Parent gets child in swimming clothes. I then collect the child and take them in the water with me. The parent can watch me with the child and I will be able to model how I interact and engage with the child.
- 30 minutes working with child and chatting. Since November- each child has 30 minutes. 4 sessions dates up to summer (10 more sessions)

We hope eventually to team up parents- children paired up which would give them the opportunity to speak to one another and this may help with their feelings of isolation.

This is a big commitment in terms of time. It takes a full day of my time with each child and their parents getting the opportunity once every 3 weeks.

Next step- Key worker being involved a bit more in the sessions in future.

**How will I know the impact my actions are having? How does this relate to 'improved outcomes'? What 'evidence' will I have?**

We need to be sure that this initiative will work. Already the team are seeing the benefit of it. We all want our relationships with parents to be better.

- Formative and summative assessments- See progress in individuals such as eye contact, vocalisation.
- Observations- Child more trusting-physical contact etc
- Capture parental accounts and their feedback.
- It has already been noted that in the daily diaries parents are using the comments section more now.
- After several sessions some parents wanting now to come in water with me. Comments have included  
"It's amazing to see how you are with her!"

