

# Multi-agency training and the artist



## Sharing our experience

Practitioner-led research 2008-2009

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This report is part of CWDC's Practitioner-Led Research (PLR) programme. Now in its third year, the programme gives practitioners the opportunity to explore, describe and evaluate ways in which services are currently being delivered within the children's workforce.

Working alongside mentors from Making Research Count (MRC), practitioners design and conduct their own small-scale research and then produce a report which is centred around the delivery of Integrated Working.

The reports are used to improve ways of working, recognise success and provide examples of good practice.

This year, 41 teams of practitioners completed projects in a number of areas including:

- Adoption
- Bullying
- CAF
- Child trafficking
- Disability
- Early Years
- Education Support
- Parenting
- Participation
- Social care
- Social work
- Travellers
- Youth

The reports have provided valuable insights into the children and young people's workforce, and the issues and challenges practitioners and service users face when working in an integrated environment. This will help to further inform workforce development throughout England.

This practitioner-led research project builds on the views and experiences of the individual projects and should not be considered the opinions and policies of CWDC.

# **Multi-agency training and the artist**

**Peter Catling and David Jenkins**

**Woodland Park Nursery and Children's Centre, Haringey and  
PLEY (Proactive Learning from Early Years)**

## **Acknowledgements**

We are grateful to CWDC for supporting this practitioner-centred research and to our allocated supervisor Donald Forrester for combining a sharp critical intelligence with a light touch. But our main debt is to the participants who undertook the exercise and joined us in this collaborative research endeavour.

## **Abstract**

The Multi-Agency Team Project approached issues of multi-agency training indirectly by using an artist as a catalyst in a group exercise examining movement and sound in relation to early childhood.

The aim of the research was to run an experiential non-traditional training programme based on using an artist as a catalyst to promote inter-agency dialogue in one setting, Woodlands Park Nursery and Children's Centre, and to analyse the findings.

Eleven participants used this common experiential focus to frame collective research both as a focus group and as individual fieldworkers. The research demonstrated shared professional discourse but also collected judgements relevant to policy issues based on collaborative professional reflection triggered by the exercise.

The findings are presented theoretically in terms of critical discourse analysis using the interpretation-supporting software ATLAS.ti. We next take a further look at the role play exercise in which the group constituted itself as a 'House of Commons Select Committee' before summarizing what theoretical insights might be brought to bear and attempting to draw some provisional conclusions. Some evidence is presented suggesting there is a degree of tension and ambiguity between alternative models of multi-agency working.

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(Proactive Learning from Early Years)**

## Introduction

The CWDC theme of 'integrated working' (ie multi-agency collaboration) can be seen as a response to *Every Child Matters: Change for Children*, the 2003 green paper published alongside the government's response to the Laming Report, itself following an investigation into the circumstances surrounding the earlier death in Haringey of a child known to the social services. In effect it set up a programme for a national framework to support the 'joining up' of children's services – education, culture, health, social care, and justice. Local education authorities were to work through children's trusts with partner organizations to explore 'what works best'. There was no blueprint beyond the view that agencies need to 'team up in new ways', and this has led to a diversity of practice.

When the CWDC call for practitioner-centred research around the theme of inter-agency work was published, Proactive Learning from Early Years (PLEY) had already been commissioned by Creative Partnerships London North to run an experiential non-traditional training programme based on using an artist as a catalyst to promote inter-agency dialogue in one setting, Woodlands Park Nursery and Children's Centre. It was to this initiative that a research agenda was attached. CWDC had made it clear that they were not prepared to finance artists-in-residence, and provisional funding was only confirmed when the separation of the CPLN and CWDC agendas was spelled out.

## Practitioner led research

CWDC broadly defines practitioner led research within an established tradition of supporting 'reflective practitioners'<sup>1</sup>, but in doing so is a long way from endorsing personal introspection as a method. The reflection must not only be *critical* reflection but conducted in the spirit of evidence based policy research (i.e. ultimately concerned with public knowledge), and as such might well consider the strictures of the 2003 document *Quality in Qualitative Evaluation* commissioned by the Strategic Unit in the Cabinet Office, in which 'policy research' requires 'social purpose linked to methodological and analytical rigour', although differing philosophies and alternative epistemological positions are correctly seen as potentially leading to different kinds of research. We claim the right in this research to be judged by the norms of the paradigm chosen, which was broadly ethnographic and is explained more fully below.

This is a case study exhuming the principles behind an exemplary instance not survey research drawing inferences from a sample to a population. It is in part the task of the reader to adjudicate between valid generalizations and local effects, but both will be present. The identification of the children's centre is unavoidable given both the special circumstances described and the

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<sup>1</sup> See Schon (1990).

decision to accompany the written account with a video<sup>2</sup>. Given that our setting was in Haringey, the fieldwork was overshadowed by the repercussions of the tragic 'Baby P' case. What effect this had was unclear, but using a movement artist as a catalyst in inter-agency training risked appearing a trivial response.

The lynchpin artist was movement specialist Lesley Hutchison. Lesley has held a variety of posts as a performer, amateur and director, working with the arts in school and community settings, including movement direction for the RSC and children's television work for the BBC. The basic idea was to give professionals from a variety of agencies working through Woodlands Park Children's Centre a common experiential focus. The project used movement and sound as a method of exploring the developmental needs of young children. The 'sound' side was supported by Helen Strange, a RADA voice and communication specialist who works with actors.

Woodlands Park Nursery and Children's Centre is an inner city provider offering multi-agency support to children and their families in Haringey as well as supporting the development of a cluster of nurseries. This report is co-authored by Peter Catling, the Director of the Centre (and a participant in the training) and David Jenkins, a qualitative educational researcher and evaluator and a co-director of PLEY. It is, therefore, a 'practitioner-centred' account combining an 'insider' and 'outsider' perspective.

It is policy at Woodlands Park to encourage an enquiry led reflective approach to the evolving practice of such centres, developing in educators and other agency personnel an embryonic research capacity, an active curiosity that the Centre also tries to inculcate in parents. The Centre is viewed as welcoming and inclusive by a broad range of users.

## The programme

The programme was presented as experiential learning based around shared activity working with an artist to foster individual and group reflection around thematic issues. These included alternative models of childhood, professional discourses, inclusive education, recognizing the strengths and needs of individual children, and supporting their cognitive and emotional development. The totality was aimed at developing communication and understanding among different agencies based on sharing experiences to enable more joined-up working. It also looked to make a contribution towards a model of exemplary inter-agency training that might be adopted or adapted elsewhere.

The participants were asked to view themselves as practitioner researchers in three overlapping but distinct ways. Firstly, as a collaborating multi-agency group they were required to act as a professional focus group, commissioned to use standard focus group methods in producing a group analysis (although one that might have to respect differences of viewpoint). Secondly, as

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<sup>2</sup> Also all of the 'subjects' were participant co-researchers.

individual participant or action researchers, each was expected to contribute to the overall deliberation a small-scale personal evidence based enquiry, perhaps based on a cameo or vignette. Finally, they were invited as project participants to offer feedback as evaluators on the perceived usefulness or otherwise of this form of multi-agency training.

The original intention was to include representatives from all the major agencies working at Woodlands Park, but in the event we did not attract a midwife or an educational psychologist. The reason given by the educational psychologist who had expressed an interest was that the time given over to the project (Wednesday afternoons) would have had to be taken from time allocated specifically to the Centre and direct working with individual children. In addition, no social worker applied, which was a pity, although understandable given the siege mentality in Haringey at the time. The PPD group began with the following participants:

Head of a Nursery and Children's Centre

Early Years Advisory Teacher

Early Years Development Officer

Speech and Language Therapist

Health Visitor

Community Outreach Worker

Information Officer

Family Support Worker

Nursery Officer

Extended Day Co-ordinator

Parent and Music workshop leader.

The PPD training programme was organized as a series of two and a half hour sessions on Wednesday afternoons and took place in space at Woodlands Park that had been radically uncluttered from its usual condition to allow movement work. The pedagogy, typically for this kind of programme, followed the norms of non-formal education, being interactive and dialogue based, using activities and creative methods to develop both individual and group learning relevant to the skills and practical understandings of the participants<sup>3</sup>. Each session comprised separate elements which broadly fell into two parts: firstly, the exploration of movement and sound, and secondly, reflections on multi-agency working. As the training progressed and relationships became stronger the different elements of the training sessions fused quite naturally into a single whole.

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<sup>3</sup> See eg the 2001 Report from the Council of Europe Symposium on Non-Formal Education.

## Introductory session

The first session was a standard round robin 'get to know you' occasion followed by an introduction to the project. A number of introductory exercises around evoked memories explored the often neglected overlap between personal and professional identities<sup>4</sup> ('who we are' and 'what we do'), and although an initial guardedness remained, some interesting ideas emerged, indicating a culturally diverse group:

'Singing nursery rhymes and telling stories we remembered from our own childhood made lots of links to other cultures.'<sup>5</sup>

'The physical and visual mapping of where we had started life and where we had arrived gave us a sense of space and distance and of how many cultures we represented.'

An indirect approach to the grammar of collaboration used collaborative games (e.g. working in pairs to produce a joint drawing in silence, or giving one partner a crayon and the other a rubber<sup>6</sup>) as a way of setting up the research agenda: what is joined-up multi-agency working and what is meant by constituting ourselves as a focus group and as participant researchers?

Working in pairs the participants interviewed each other and presented a profile back to the group. Not everybody was within their comfort zone. The group was beginning to gel but one of the more senior members in hierarchical terms was already planning her early exit.

## Practical session 1

Movement artist Lesley Hutchison gave this aspect of the workshop a strong initial focus on the 'every child' at the centre of multi-agency 'matters' by organizing the initial activities to follow the developmental pattern of movement in early childhood, through which the participants were able to empathize with how an infant perforce plays out a sequence that not only parallels the evolutionary steps towards mammalian biology but carries cognitive and emotional weight:

'The movements we practised were the movements of a baby but they were also the movements of an animal, but a very ancient animal, a reptile.'

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<sup>4</sup> There has been a strong interest in the linkage between personal and professional biographies since the pioneering work of Ivor Goodman (see Knowles (1992).

<sup>5</sup> Here and below indented observations are verbatim comments by participants.

<sup>6</sup> This particular example was borrowed from TAPP (The Teacher Artist Partnership Programme).



Within the idioms of movement work, the group tasks set were expressive and relationship building, but also aimed at honing observation skills. Knowing about the body language of very young children aged 0 to 4 gives us a basis on which we might interpret their behaviour. The participants clearly enjoyed the workshop and felt that their curiosity about children was being stimulated in a new way.

In this session an opportunity was also created for participants to reflect on each other's professional roles and to see how these matched up to the reality. The job title of each participant was written on a separate sheet of paper accompanied by three questions: *What qualification does this job require? What will somebody employed in this job do? Who will they come into contact with?* Participants were allowed to write on everyone's sheet but their own before the subject elaborated and commented on misperceptions.

## **Practical session 2**

Exploring the body as an expressive instrument was expanded to reflect on the value of 'whole body movement' for this age group, but at the same time addressing through 'contact/release' work the polite inhibitions we have towards human physicality and the preservation of social distance. One activity involved pair exercises in which participants were asked to crawl around with a partner sprawled recumbent on their backs.

'You're doing something quite close, when we were lying on each other I initially found it quite difficult because you are actually lying on somebody, then I thought, well actually I've laid on you so, well I can sort of do anything now.'

'Not everyone was comfortable with the things we had to do. Sometimes we were out of our comfort zone.'

Subsequent discussion covered the relationship between inhibition and hierarchy, trust, the nature of knowing and feeling comfortable with other people, the dichotomy between personal and professional personae and (by extension) the value or otherwise of the moral panic surrounding the non-sexual touching of young children. Are we missing out on a source of emotional intelligence?

There was a further reflective element to do with seeing and interpreting, with the participants as representatives of the different agencies invited to interrogate their underpinning models of childhood. It began to emerge that there were three broad orientations: an 'educational' perspective, a 'health' perspective and a 'societal' perspective, and that these configured our perceived professional identities in quite subtle ways.

### **Practical session 3**

Helen Strange, a voice expert from RADA, had been invited to contribute to the third practical session in a way that paralleled Lesley Hutchison's approach to movement work, by tracing the development of sound making in children. She suggested that very young children enjoy exploratory sound making in a way that later inhibitions curtail; professional adults dealing with children, as well as needing to be better placed in understanding these processes in infants, could themselves benefit from recapturing something of this spontaneity.

'Suddenly we had this amazing sound, this chord that we had made together, we were comfortable and relaxed in a way that I think we couldn't have been if we had just been sitting on chairs talking.'

### **Practical session 4**

The first part was a role play exercise in which the group set itself up as a House of Commons Department of Children, Schools and Families Select Committee, hearing evidence on multi-agency working. This was followed by a review session reflecting on the learning over the period of the exercise. Comments were in general supportive.

'The skills needed in all of the professions and in parenthood are really numerous, and include being a learner too. We realized just how much learning needs to continue beyond our initial qualifications and how much is on the job.'

## **Methodology and methods**

Although the research question as specified to CWDC was cast broadly in terms of analysing the problems and possibilities associated with a particular experiential approach to supporting multi-agency integrated working, it broke down naturally into a number of subsidiary questions, each of which raised a different subset of research methods and theoretical frameworks. These are addressed in summary below.

The model being tested was seen as complementary to the training provision set up under the approach outlined in the 2008 DCSF *Children's Plan: Building a Brighter Future* and *Every Child Matters* with respect to multi-agency services and was designed in the light of the information-sharing protocols and the CAF (Common Assessment Framework) by which the needs and strengths of individual children are to be identified and met. As indicated above, the project combined sustained shared activity using an artist as a catalyst with an action/participant research approach in which participants were encouraged to identify a problem area relating to integrated inter-agency working and identify local solutions.

Although in typical focus group research the participants are *informants* and not fellow *researchers*, we took the view that we still needed somebody (in our case DJ) to take a moderating role to stimulate interaction, highlight nuances in interpretation and pull the conclusions together. Since the informants were clearly identified as participant researchers, collective deliberation was done in the sessions, not subsequently, and a sample of this discussion has been captured on video<sup>7</sup>.

A further need was to support the individual participant led research contributions, looking for cross-case generalizations and assessing the implications for future practice. This was explained to the participants in terms of a jigsaw puzzle, their individual pieces contributing to the overall picture. The overarching framework was collaborative action research<sup>8</sup>, seeking to set up a 'self-critical community'. Under this umbrella the individual research projects were free to adopt other styles of practitioner-centred research (eg conceptual clarification, participant observation, document analysis, descriptive statistics, collecting anecdotes as cameos or vignettes, hypothesis testing etc).

In spite of a limited use of ATLAS.ti as interpretation-supporting software (see Appendix 1) we did not premise this research on grounded theory<sup>9</sup> and therefore felt no compunction to enter the fieldwork 'shorn of all theory' and intent only on paying attention to the situation. Indeed, we took into the setting a jumble of theoretical frameworks in the expectation that we would find some of them useful. These included role theory, critical discourse analysis, small-group theory, theories relating to the problems of teachers, health workers and social workers as 'semi-professionals', communications theory and cognitive and ecological psychology.

## **Ethics**

The ethical stance taken in this research was based on standard principles of informed consent, confidentiality and the avoidance of harm to individuals. There is no identification of individual children or their families and any illustrative material is anonymised and presented in a policy context. Although Woodlands Park Nursery School and Children's Centre is unavoidably identified, and the participants will be recognizable, at least to those who know them, from the video, the assumption is that the underlying dynamics

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<sup>7</sup> One practical difficulty was that Lesley Hutchison was trying to manage three roles, artist, discussant and video ethnographer, so we do not have blanket coverage.

<sup>8</sup> Using an approach developed in Australia (see Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) and McTaggart (1989)). One difficulty was that within this research there was insufficient time for a complete iterative cycle. On the other hand Woodlands Park Nursery and Children's Centre sees the MAT project as part of an ongoing process.

<sup>9</sup> Grounded theory in its pure form is a rigorous inductive process in which the theory emerges from the data (See Strauss and Corbin (1994)).

are representative, can be generalized and carry policy implications. The participants involved in the research provided their consent and they agreed to the level of identification within the report. Participants featured in the video were given the opportunity to be involved in the editing.

## Documentation and analysis of the data

This section is an attempt to present aspects of the documentation and data analysis and how the coding and theoretical memos within ATLAS.ti were used to support a theoretical and practical account of the research questions lying behind the project. It is in four parts. We first discuss the role of the video record both as a research tool and in the presentation of findings. The focus then moves to an examination of the discourse that constituted the deliberations around the experiential and movement-based activity that drove the project as a PPD programme. This is followed by a selection of 'critical incidents' identified by individual practitioner researchers as their research focus. We next take a further look at the role play exercise in which the group constituted itself as a 'House of Commons Select Committee' before summarizing what theoretical insights might be brought to bear and attempting to draw some provisional conclusions.

## Video ethnography and the 'surrogate experience'

This report is accompanied by a video record [hyperlink]. Video documentation carries a double advantage, offering both a rich source of data – its own kind of 'thick description'<sup>10</sup> and a surrogate experience of the programme. No spurious claims are offered that video is *kino glas* realism or a vehicle of unvarnished truth, a view attributed to Dziga Vertov's (1929) *Man with a Movie Camera*. It may be useful to differentiate between footage which captures data relatively free from observer interference (eg quasi-realism in documenting the movement activities) and 'artificial' footage where the relationship with the camera is integral to the data (eg neo-constructivism in the 'Select Committee' role play exercise)<sup>11</sup>.

A video record also allows data to be stored in a form that permits emerging interpretations to be checked and re-checked against the data and used as a stimulus in further data collection. 'Clips' can also be segmented into 'primary documents' for the purposes of the interpretation-supporting software and analysed for content and themes alongside interview transcripts and other written material.

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<sup>10</sup> Geertz (1999).

<sup>11</sup> These ideas are interestingly explored in the 'Findings' from the *Ethnography for the Digital Age* project (2002-2004), Cardiff University. <http://www.cf.ac.uk/soc/hyper/p02/findings.html>

## Discourse analysis

Our approach to the language of multi-agency collaboration approximates to the style of enquiry styled as 'critical discourse analysis'<sup>12</sup>. A central idea is that linguistic signs can be analysed for 'ideological positioning', since we all tell our 'stories' in a way that reflects our beliefs about the world. Our interest, then, is in looking at social interaction which takes a linguistic (or partly linguistic) form. There is an assumption of 'a dialectical relationship between discourses and the institutions and social structures that frame them'.

Although the act of interpreting any written or spoken 'text' is problematic, particularly in relation to movement between the whole and its parts<sup>13</sup>, it is possible to characterize tentatively the discourse of inter-agency working. The basis on which we offer this account is twofold, the language recorded in the sessions and what the participants said about inter-agency working as it occurred outside the confines of the workshop. There was some tension and ambiguity between the two accounts.

One of the problems of inter-agency working is that the coming together of different specialist interests and vocabularies does not necessarily constitute a de facto 'speech community'<sup>14</sup> with high levels of shared tacit knowledge. Indeed the opposite may be the case. Yet within the reported training programme there was little evidence of inter-agency work being beset by communication difficulties to do with specialized professional vocabularies, although this could in part be attributed to the participants' collective general retreat from a specialized lexis to an agreed 'language of everyday life' for the purpose of the exercise<sup>15</sup>.

'I felt relaxed, I felt I could communicate more effectively with the group members I was working with, and found the teachers most supportive, and I think it is something that should be continued and passed on to other groups and other agencies.'

It was only the advisory teacher and the speech and language therapist who appeared visibly involved in the task of courteous translation by moderating their technical vocabularies. On the other hand this picture was somewhat different when participants described inter-agency or inter-centre language practices outside of the group, where some level of difficulty was perceived as the norm:

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<sup>12</sup> See Fairclough and Wodac (1997). The intellectual roots of critical discourse analysis go back to western Marxism, Antonio Gramsci and the Frankfurt School (Darder et al. 2003).

<sup>13</sup> A nice account of some of the difficulties can be found in Kinneavy (1983).

<sup>14</sup> A term normally reserved for tribes, religions, ethnic groupings etc.

<sup>15</sup> There was perhaps a greater difficulty in coming to terms with the language of research, previous experience of which was distributed unevenly among the group.

‘We all use jargon, everybody speaks in jargon; you want to say, I don’t understand, but you don’t feel able to.’

‘People assume that if you want something you’ll ask a question but sometimes you don’t know the question to ask.’

‘The Centre Heads meeting has also developed an opaque jargon-laden discourse that obscures rather than clarifies the issues. Meetings have become a badly-attended focus for participants’ frustrations rather than a constructive focus for problem-solving.’

There was some reluctance to concede that a converging specialist vocabulary would be useful, and the extended conversations said to be needed for inter-agency working were defined more like ‘enhanced chat’. The one area where the group felt in need of a better understanding was in relation to the *procedural* knowledge of other agencies, e.g. in the categories and thresholds that drive child protection legislation or in a more holistic understanding of the communication protocols that underpin the referral system:

‘We wanted to understand the different roles of colleagues, how their workplace ticks and what their training had included; sometimes it included the understanding of very specific legislation.’

One ‘critical incident’ reported showed how different doctrines concerning what information it is legitimate to collect can inhibit progress towards an agreed protocol, although, as ever, personal factors seem to have come into the equation. In some circumstances, arguments like those reported are not neutral contributions to a discussion as much as impression management by actors wishing to dramatize a ‘position’, in this case one of political correctness around privacy issues:

‘A meeting between information officers, heads of centres and the monitoring officer was held to discuss the new registration form in anticipation of the new database system and to ensure that every centre would use and interpret the form in the same way. One very vocal individual took over the meeting, pressing his viewpoint. He was right and everyone else wrong. The facilitator was getting frustrated and I was getting angry. I explained the reason we wanted to know a person’s ethnicity and what use it was to us. Parents might put down ‘White British’ if born in this country but their origins might be Polish. We might be thinking of putting on a special evening for Polish families. The same man demanded to know why we wanted so much information about the parents. It transpired that there was a lot of confusion over how the reporting should be done and what we were counting. This has led to all new staff being retrained on the monitoring system.’

A number of conversations between participants triggered by the activities explored each other’s occupational frameworks but it could be noted in

general that the accounts tended to be framed in operational and bureaucratic rather than professional terms:

‘All I can do is put in my recommendation. It is not up to me whether it is acted upon. I may not even be at the relevant meeting.’

There was some recognition that the ‘performances’ allowed in inter-agency work are defined by role rather than identity<sup>16</sup>, and ‘put on’ akin to the wearing and exchanging of hats:

‘I feel I have different hats; sometimes I am a professional, sometimes a parent, sometimes a hybrid wearing two hats.’

Is multi-agency working about the creation of professional hybrids? This is a more difficult question than it seems. Perhaps ‘putting the child at the centre’ is an attempt to encourage a converging discourse, but if so how would it effect the professional status of those working in the more prestigious agencies<sup>17</sup>, if seeming to erode their ‘esoteric knowledge base’?

‘We had a strong impression of the group being very diverse, everybody being an interesting mix, hybrids, being transferred from one place to another.’

‘We were a group of people with a range of roles and responsibilities, a diverse group in terms of cultures and professions but with a shared, common focus: to work closely with children and their families.’

‘The personal and the professional come together when we work like this; we do it and then think about how it feels and how it affects our practice.’

It may be useful to comment on the characteristics of inter-agency discourse by invoking a framework put forward by Michael Halliday. Halliday suggests that the contexts for language can be considered in relation to three categories: field, tenor and mode<sup>18</sup>.

*Field* is subject matter or cultural activity. One interesting feature of inter-agency collaboration is that for the ‘new’ agency personnel brought within the remit of a nursery and children’s centre like Woodlands Park, unlike the educators, their ‘cultural activity’ is dispersed between a number of settings,

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<sup>16</sup> Although the word ‘role’ here is used in its standard sociological sense, there is also a passing nod to Erving Goffman’s insights into the ‘dramaturgy of everyday life’. These will be an undercurrent in our account of the ‘House of Commons Select Committee’ role play exercise (see Goffman, E 1959).

<sup>17</sup> It is a realistic background factor that different agencies enjoy different levels of professional training and differential public esteem.

<sup>18</sup> See *Descriptions of English*, the Oxford Brookes Module Reader for the MA/TESOL (2006).

often (especially in the front line of dealing directly with families causing concern) involving radically different rules of engagement and 'reference individuals' who act as sources of normative grounding. The health visitor in the group spoke tellingly of the subtle and at times contradictory strategies she has had to adopt to secure the cooperation of families:

'I would say to the mother that I was from health and not a social worker. But I also had to explain that there were some kinds of information I would be obliged to pass on to the appropriate authorities.'

It is a truism of ecological psychology from Roger Barker's first formulation that human behaviour is 'radically situated' and only predictable by reference to situation, context and environment<sup>19</sup>. In effect, the different situations in which peripatetic professionals work constitute separate psychological habitats. One task of the project was an attempt to gain access to this *other* life of the participants and not define 'joined-up multi-agency collaboration' as simply a matter of what goes on in Woodlands Park Nursery and Children's Centre. 'Field' is also important for inter-agency working because we are dealing with overlapping conceptual fields and each agency will have its own comparative and normative reference groups<sup>20</sup>.

*Tenor* is social relations between discussants, most usually thought of in terms of a power gradient. This is undoubtedly one of the more interesting but potentially fraught areas, exposing ambiguities between the behavioural settings. Woodlands Park, in spite of the clarity of its internal roles and clear proactive leadership, aspires to a democratic and collegiate style of management. [DJ: It is significant that the director and my fellow author Peter Catling signed up to the training programme as a participant.] This was underpinned by Lesley Hutchison and Helen Strange in how they handled the movement and sound workshops, which had a distinctly open non-hierarchical feel to them, the deliberate adoption of a 'personal' tone serving to weaken the hierarchy and 'create solidarity'. This was acknowledged in the feedback:

'We were a very democratic group in terms of leadership and the sharing of information, a cohesive group who gelled well and who worked well together in different ways, on different tasks.'

Another informant claimed:

'There isn't a hierarchy as such within the Centre. We are a team, and everyone's job is seen as just as important as another one. We are also a united team.'

Yet there is perhaps an underlying paradox here in that much of the work in occupational sociology on the status problems of teachers, teaching

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<sup>19</sup> Barker (1968). See also Heft (2001).

<sup>20</sup> See Jenkins (1971).



assistants, health workers and social workers is premised on the view that they are ‘semi-professionals trapped in bureaucracies’<sup>21</sup>. In the wider social context our participant researchers represented a feminized and in some senses oppressed workforce<sup>22</sup> with conditions of work<sup>23</sup>, particularly in the front line of risk management, not especially conducive either to quality recruitment or professional reflexivity. Even when things appear to go spectacularly wrong, as they did in Haringey during our fieldwork, there is a disposition by government to seek bureaucratic rather than professional solutions, accompanied by making scapegoats of individuals.

*Mode* is the medium of communication – at its crudest spoken, as against written. The focus group was clear that joined-up multi-agency collaboration needs both modes, but there may be an issue to do with balancing out the advantages and disadvantages of each. High levels of tacit knowledge and group solidarity arise from conversations between trusting colleagues who have established empathy and trust, although given the time constraints even casual conversation may need to be scheduled. On the other hand, written notes ‘on the record’ using clear communication protocols are important and is a skills area in need of development, although this is a necessary rather than a sufficient condition of good risk management.

‘We realized how many other professionals we interact and share information with on an informal basis, in passing, chatting, or just having a break.’

‘As well as our individual professional skills we all had to be excellent interactive communicators who could multi-task with patience, empathy, extensive informal knowledge and great organizing abilities.’

## **Critical incidents concerned with ‘joined-up’ working**

One suggested format for the practitioner researchers was for us to note and report on observed ‘critical incidents’, ie some narrative or vignette appearing to carry significance. We only have space here for a selection, beginning with a couple of incidents suggesting a problem or room for improvement – or at least an issue – and concluding with what a self-critical group regarded as legitimate cause for celebration.

Linking back to the discussion above is the need beyond inter-agency communication strategies to address communication with parents and community stakeholders in the context of the multi-ethnic inner city, and several participants cited a critical incident in this area, although there was

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<sup>21</sup> The phrase is Etzioni’s (see Etzioni 1969).

<sup>22</sup> All of the participants except the Director of the Centre were women.

<sup>23</sup> See Giroux (2006).

some evidence that multi-agency working was making inroads into the problems:

‘Looking at our reach figures there is still much we could do to reach certain communities such as Black Caribbean, Turkish and Bangladeshi. As a Centre we know we have not been successful in reaching these groups, and this has led us to think about how we work and setting new targets for next year.’

‘Data gathered through the collection of registration forms shows high levels of contact with particular groups who often find it hard to access services: such as fathers, parents with disabled children. Nevertheless there are some groups who are still not fully accessing the full range of services. This is particularly in relation to parents who have English as an additional language and staff who are part-time and often less well qualified. In both cases the information sharing process is not robust enough to ensure that these groups receive high quality information and are able to participate effectively in a decision-making process. Staff who are less well qualified and part-time are not able to access all of the information and training opportunities that exist. This has the effect of reinforcing the existing hierarchies.’

In both cases, imaginative and robust approaches to information sharing need to be introduced and followed through. Communication protocols should not be over-reliant on written forms of communication but should ensure that parents and staff are included in a cascading of information that is two way. Such a system might involve community champions and a widening of the role of key workers.

Issues in collaborative working may arise within a centre’s staff as well as between agencies:

‘This year we merged two rooms and age groups into a single under 3’s room. Some staff had not worked together before and others were new to the experience of working with new age groups. Better support could have been in place with team-building sessions to cement shared goals and build relationships.’

The Director of the Centre chose to become a participant observer and ethnographer at two meetings, recording the general ambiance and procedures as a critical commentary on the decision-making processes, a research task some way removed from conventional minute taking. This twin account can be taken as the transition between our negative and positive narratives.

‘The Heads of Centres Report Group meets twice a term at different Children’s Centres. Although the possible total membership is 17 (from Phase 1 and Phase 2 Centres), attendance is varied and unreliable. Ostensibly set up to discuss a broad range of policy issues, the meetings are frequently loosely chaired and drift into tangential issues

specific to individual centres. Although originally emerging from a well structured research initiative, the present strategic purpose is unclear as it remains ambivalent in relation to the authority's decision-making frameworks.'

'The Senior Leadership Meeting at Woodlands Park involves eight staff in a broad range of roles and is scheduled weekly for one hour with a flexible strategic agenda that staff can add to. The 'strategy' orientation is protected by agreed ground rules to avoid getting lost in operational detail and is outcome-focused with decisions minuted. The roles of chair and minute-taker rotate. It has struggled in the past but is now regarded as a useful meeting with a democratic style, agreed procedures, and a high level of participation.'

Many of the positive comments indicated considerable progress towards joined-up multi-agency working. One of our researchers concentrated on activity in and around the baby-weighing clinic:

'I believe we are starting to work very well with the health visiting team. The health services' move into the children's centres has brought us a whole new audience. The baby-weighing clinic has attracted up to 75 families. We are using waiting time to give them information about other children's services and are targeting families who need extra help.'

'One of the ladies who attended the weigh-ins is deaf and had at times seemed confrontational, but over the months the barriers have come down. She is starting to use other services [like baby massage].'

Another took the garden as a microcosm:

'I felt the launch of our new garden was a success, involving a number of outside agencies who had worked with us, including community volunteers. Parents performed in a play and one of our staff organized a dance. There was a bear hunt, a quiz involving a wizard and a story about a magic feather.'

## **Role play: the ‘House of Commons Select Committee’**

The final session of the MAT project was set up as a role play exercise with participants responding to the following invitation:

*House of Commons Children Schools and Families Committee*

20 November 2008  
Meeting on Multi-agency Working

Dear Named Witness

A meeting will be held on 17 December 2008 to consider written and oral submissions on issues facing joined-up multi-agency working in Children’s Centres. My committee is pleased to inform you that it has accepted your offer to give oral evidence. You may, if you wish, also submit written evidence but this should be no more than one page of A4 and organized as a series of bullet points.

The members of the Committee will be David Jenkins and Ms Helen Strange, plus one other. Please present yourself to the House of Commons Clerk at least five minutes before the proceedings begin.

Yours sincerely

David Jenkins [acting Chairperson]

Since this exercise makes up about half of the accompanying video the account offered here is a brief one. The format of the role play was that the ‘committee’ receiving evidence was constituted as comprising David Jenkins and Helen Strange with one of the participants added to its membership on a rotating basis. So each participant played two roles, primary as an expert witness but also having a turn as a member.

The questioning followed a broad pattern, but with considerable room for supplementary follow-ups.

1. What is your name and job title? Tell us something about your day-to-day work.
2. What do you understand to be the role and function of children’s centres? Why do you think education, social services, health provision and the voluntary sector should work more closely together?
3. What experiences can you draw upon in helping the Select Committee make its recommendations? What is the level and quality of contact you have with colleagues from other agencies?
4. If you had any anxieties about the emotional or physical wellbeing of a particular child, what would you be expected to do?

5. How can provision best discover and meet the needs of individual children and families experiencing difficulties of various kinds?

A selection of comments on inter-agency working from particular perspectives follows. The questions asked of Peter Catling were more extensive to cover his leadership role and aspects of Centre policy<sup>24</sup>. The accounts reveal how situated are the understandings of the informants and the extent to which the problems they face are often very job-specific. Nevertheless, there was a common feeling that all would benefit from a wider picture and that getting to know their colleagues more intimately had been a positive experience.

*Family Support Worker*

'I support families from different backgrounds with different and complex needs covering mental health and child protection. As professionals we need to have knowledge of other services, how to access them and how to work them. We do outreach work with isolated families and attend training workshops.'

*Information Officer*

'I collect information about activities that are going on in the Centre and in the area. I have been asked to find schools, guitar lessons, football clubs, been asked questions about benefits, tax credits. Sometimes I am able to direct questions to other professionals, as over health matters. The data base that we use needs updating.'

*Senior Nursery Officer*

'My role as Nursery Officer is to make families feel comfortable enough to settle their children in with me. I act as an advocate for that child, for their wellbeing, and personal and social development. It can be very difficult working with people you don't know and their various professional attitudes. Getting to understand their needs and working well with them can be very emotionally draining sometimes, although we try to support each other as colleagues.'

'I work with other professionals when a child has some special needs, with an educational psychologist for example. We have to assess the needs of individual children through observation, through relationship building, through getting to know the children really well, their interests and their needs. It comes down to your own professional judgement and whoever else is on hand.'

*Health Visitor*

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<sup>24</sup> The account of Peter's contribution is written by David.

'I am working with a teaching primary care trust with Great Ormond Street where we go for training days. My first contact with families is through a home birth visit. The information shared with the Children's Centre is sent on with the parents' permission, they sign a document to say so. We have been having meetings with our managers about changing some of the ways that we ask questions. We used to ask, "How is your health?" Now we ask, "Do you smoke?"; "Have there been any issues of domestic violence?"; "Have you had any mental health issues?" We can assess whether we are being told the truth as we usually have information before we go in if social services are involved.'

'A lot of parents feel there is a stigma attached to being on the child protection register. A number of parents come to nursery here and they don't want to meet here in the school with the social workers because other parents would know.'

'In the children's centres we book sessions, although our work has been suspended due to staff shortages, and see parents of babies from six weeks and do health assessments on them. I don't on the whole meet other professionals when I come here apart from speaking to the nursery teachers.'

#### *Centre Director*

[The Director is responsible for day-to-day management and also the strategic development of Woodlands Park as a children's centre, including the interface with the local authority and other agencies in the area. The quotations given below were in response to questions during the role play exercise in which Peter had joined as a participant.]

'The aspiration is to connect all the services and act as a single gateway...the practitioners on the front line see the need for joint training for that working together, but whether that need is fed through into the training programmes at management level, I am not so sure.'

'The work with our local health partners has really flourished and is at a stage where the thinking around working together is creative.'

After describing the various information-sharing protocols in place in the Centre [see the video] the questioning turned to child support and protection issues in relation to which alert open-mindedness by staff and professional visitors to cues that might indicate possible needs or problems as critical, as is the sharing of information. At the less dramatic end of the spectrum is managing access to services like speech and language support:

'We have a very clear safeguarding policy which is backed up by training based on a single referral route reviewed by a panel. Embedded and intrinsic is that parental permission is sought and given.'

At the sharp end?

‘Our policies mirror those of other professionals working on the same thresholds. It is really for us, as a training issue, to make sure that the range of people we are working with, including volunteers, are up to speed on what are the indicators and who are the key responsible people who need to be involved. Specific issues we might be looking at fall into a variety of categories, like neglect, emotional wellbeing or sexual abuse. In my view the training we receive from the local safeguarding board is of good quality. Training is available in mental health issues as well as child protection and more generic training. I do feel quite secure with our own procedures.’

As indicated above, more satisfactory access to the role play exercise, particularly its interrogatory style, might be through the video.

## Evaluating the model

The participants were invited to offer concluding reflections on the experience of the PPD programme and evaluate its potential usefulness as a model for niche inter-agency training. If training of this kind were to continue, how could it be developed or improved. Although this agenda is as much a concern of CPLN as of CWDC, it is appropriate that it should occupy modest space in this report.

There was little doubt that the participants found the movement and sound workshops enjoyable and creatively stimulating, as well as creating a strong group identity:

‘My team leader said, “Would you like to do a course about inter-agency working? You will have to pretend to be a child and sit on the floor”; and I thought, “Oh no”. But I came and did the floor exercises to the best of my ability and I really started enjoying it.’

‘We all are involved in Early Years and we all talk about play being important but we never get to play; this experiment had a playfulness about it.’

But was it work?

‘If you’ve got a supportive manager the links are there, if they say, as she said, “don’t worry this is going to help you in the long run”, you don’t feel guilty leaving the work behind you because you know overall this is going to help.’

One interesting issue was the confluence of two approaches, the artist as catalyst and the mixed group of participants as practice-centred researchers.

Both halves of the equation – creativity and a sceptical cast of mind – were eventually seen by the participants as able (to adopt a Quaker turn of phrase) to ‘speak to their condition’. Comments included the following:

‘I think it is valuable to work with artists as I see myself as an artist, as you have to be creative when working with small children. The input of a professional artist is inspiring, giving you ideas and a different perspective. Being a researcher, observing and analysing, is part of what we nursery officers do, setting steps for the children’s learning, questioning and listening.’

A sceptical researchers’ cast of mind was also seen as essential to child protection practices, as well as general professional awareness:

‘We need to have an understanding of child development, good communication skills and the ability to problem-solve. We have to be non-judgemental but sometimes a bit of a detective.’

The opportunity to be playful and mirror the playfulness of children was appreciated, but we must remain mindful of Guy Claxton’s observation that playfulness and hard thinking often go together and are a formidable combination<sup>25</sup>.

There is no doubt that the project brought people together in an extremely successful format and that the group gained in coherence and solidarity as well as learning a lot about each other’s occupational and ecological niches. The Centre director believes it made an important contribution to joined-up multi-agency working in Woodlands Park Nursery and Children’s Centre. He feels that it will support inter-agency participation in planning and delivery of mainstream projects.

On the other hand it would be foolhardy to claim for the ‘artist as catalyst’ more than value as niche provision, possibly important but necessarily set alongside and in the context of more conventional offerings. It is itself capable of addressing neither the skills component in multi-agency working nor contributing to the pressing problems of child protection protocols at the sharp end, naturally a current preoccupation in Haringey, although the Head of Centre believes that component parts of the training can beneficially be incorporated into existing induction training. The practitioner-centred research aspects, run in tandem, widen the substantive range and linking both to more conventional approaches would plausibly enrich the whole.

### **[Ahdg]Tentative conclusions**

This concluding section to our practitioner-centred research is offered to CWDC in two parallel contrasting formats, neither of them mainstream in research reportage. The first is the video record itself, with its documentary production values. The second is to use the ‘Network View’ facility of ATLASi

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<sup>25</sup> Claxton (2006).



in attempting some initial theory building around the problems and possibilities of inter-agency collaboration on the basis of the evidence presented to the collaborative enquiry. Both approaches are 'pictorial'.

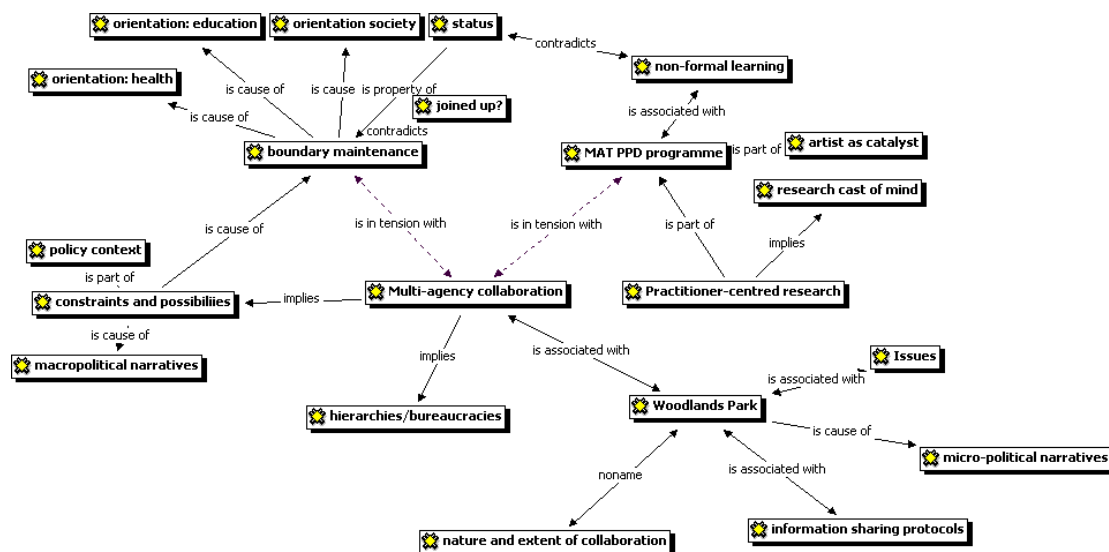
## The video record

The video record is intended to be viewed alongside this written report and is in effect a documentary record that will allow the viewer access to the events portrayed in a way which will allow independent critical judgement. A secondary purpose is to offer a basis on which the propositions in this written account might be held open to challenge.

## Network views

The network function in ATLAS.ti operates in effect as a heuristic 'right brain' approach to qualitative analysis. It is essentially a theory building tool in which a 'network view' is a diagram comprised of nodes (boxes) and links (arrowed lines joining the nodes and expressing the relationship between them). The products are conceptual maps or procedural protocols.

### Network view 1



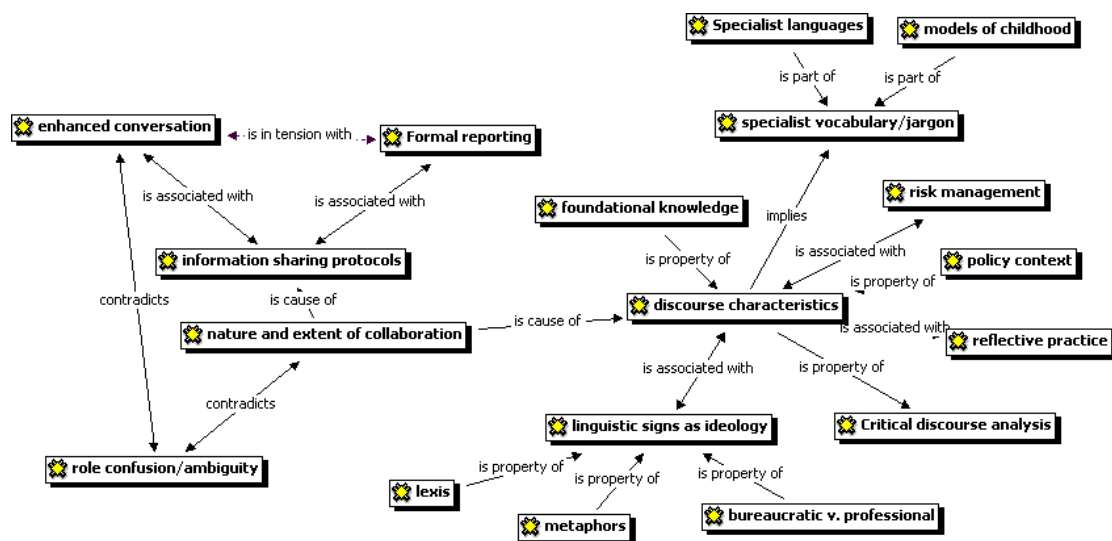
This network offers a conceptual overview of some of the relationships exposed in the research, at its heart evidencing some degree of tension between on the one hand the democratic open-ended MAT PPD programme with its use of non-formal methods and two artists as a catalysts, and on the other hand the norms of occupational sociology which suggest that multi-agency collaboration may not typically appear as a device to dismantle boundaries but to acknowledge and cross them, while preserving relative status. This boundary preservation is probably politically the more necessary

for occupations approximating to Etzioni's 'semi professionals trapped in bureaucracies', who may have good reasons to be suspicious of anything that is suggestive of a melting pot.

Behind the rhetoric of collaboration the tasks of boundary maintenance were gently going on and clear orientations emerged that could be seen as 'educational', 'health-related' or 'societal'. To some extent Woodlands Park Nursery and Children's Centre found itself having to manage the ambiguity implied in linking a strong collegiate culture with the clarity of roles and responsibilities demanded in today's audit culture. The observed macro-political and macro-political narratives at the interface between the Centre and the Authority were quite different in content, tone and genre.

This argument is developed further in the second network view, which attempts to summarize some of the language issues. As indicated above, the database for these considerations was the 'language' used by our researcher informants, which covered both the oral and written discourse within the project and comments on observed and reported language in relevant outside contexts.

## Network view 2



This network view is a little more abstract but highlights some of the discourse characteristics observed in the language surrounding the PPD programme and how they arise out of the nature and extent of collaboration in multi-agency working. The kind of collaboration envisaged by government policy on multi-agency working depends on the absence of role confusion and ambiguity.

Our research suggests that there may be some evidence in the discourse characteristics of an unresolved tension between two models of inter-agency collaboration, one dependent on dissolving boundaries and creating hybrid professionals, the other intent on boundary maintenance mitigated by robust

and clear information-sharing protocols. The first is a personal/professional solution, the second a bureaucratic one.

The Multi-Agency Training project was not neutral before these two approaches and by implication promoted the first by seeking to erode the distinction between the professional and the person and by setting up its stall on common ground. This was probably an unintended outcome, but an interesting and somewhat provocative one.

## Implications

In our view the research carries a number of implications, although they need to be put tentatively as we are extrapolating from a single case.

1. Indirect methods of addressing multi-agency collaboration may have a significant role to play in facilitating professional collaboration and joined-up working, but only if they are well understood and co-ordinated with other approaches.
2. Inter-agency dialogue, novel in its present arrangements, suffers from not constituting a de facto speech community, resulting in a partial retreat to the language of everyday life. Although there is some evidence that personnel from different agencies are interested in and picking up the procedural knowledge of colleagues from other disciplines, there is a general lack of in-depth understanding of the protocols and theoretical underpinnings of the more specialist agencies. Inter-agency work presents an opportunity for an educative effort to the common good, but it would require time and resources.
3. There is an unresolved tension between bureaucratic and professional approaches to inter-agency working which has given rise to ambiguous and at times conflicting models of the process of integration, particularly around the issue of boundary maintenance. Unless underpinning hard truths from occupational sociology can be addressed and overtly professional solutions juxtaposed with the current overemphasis on hierarchically-driven information-sharing protocols some of the problems are likely to remain.
4. Good people doing difficult jobs need support and encouragement, not an audit culture with a predisposition to blame. The best children's centres realize this but pay the penalty of being at times forced to live incognito in the interstices between administrative and monitoring structures that give every appearance of operating to less humane principles.

## Postscript

It has always been a truism of action research that analytical progress depends on the researchers putting aside their ego investment and demonstrating a genuine open-minded curiosity about the practices they are engaged in. Whether descriptive or analytical writing meets this criterion of coming out of a researcher's cast of mind is relatively easy to judge, and our readers will be aware of this. As D. H. Lawrence suggests of literature, it is important to trust the tale and not the teller.

## Appendix 1: ATLAS<sub>ti</sub> as interpretation-supporting software

ATLAS<sub>ti</sub> was utilized as a useful ‘workbench for the qualitative analysis of textual, graphical, audio and video data’<sup>26</sup>. The programme works by setting up a single ‘hermeneutic unit’ (HU) as a data platform for a project. We began by assigning ‘primary documents’ (PDs), from which ‘quotations’<sup>27</sup> (segments) were extracted. The quotations were then ‘coded’ (ie given a conceptual tag) using one of several methods for doing so (*in vivo*, open, axial or selective coding<sup>28</sup>) and theoretical memos attached. Memos are similar to codes but their main purpose is to capture evolving analytical thoughts. The codes were eventually sorted into ‘families’, as indicated below. The software also offers ‘visualization tools’ that allow the construction of conceptual maps, a facility that we return to later.

The primary documents for the MAT project were the interviews with individual and group participants, the transcripts of the ‘Select Committee’ role play together with written statements submitted to the ‘Committee’, the submitted written ‘critical incidents’ and other observations on multi-agency working in the Centre, together with the video record of the MAT process, including the movement and sound work.

The primary documents supported 58 codes which were assigned to nine code families as can be seen from this ATLAS<sub>ti</sub> print-out:

### Code Families

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HU: MAT project  
File: [C:\Documents and Settings\David\My Documents\Scientific Software\ATLAS<sub>ti</sub>\TextBank\MAT project.hpr5]  
Edited by: David  
Date/Time: 19/01/09 10:03:37

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Code Family: Constraints and possibilities  
Created: 19/01/09 07:25:59 (David)  
Codes (10): [boundary maintenance] [hierarchies/bureaucracies] [history]

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<sup>26</sup> A general introduction to ATLAS<sub>ti</sub> as a knowledge workbench is available online at <<http://www.atlasti.com/index.php>>. See also Tesch (1990) for a general account of analysis types and software tools.

<sup>27</sup> In the case of video material this takes the form of ‘clips’.

<sup>28</sup> The coding strategy involved a balance between types of coding. In particular we tried to balance the theoretically driven open coding and *in vivo* coding arising directly from terms used in the PDs.

[ignorance/understanding of other roles] [mutual trust] [role confusion/ambiguity] [semi-professional status] [time] [time management] [training]

---

Code Family: Issues

Created: 19/01/09 07:27:51 (David)

Codes (8): [Communication] [foundational knowledge] [legal responsibility] [linguistic signs as ideology] [nature and extent of collaboration] [personal and professional] [status] [time]

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Code Family: Language and discourse

Created: 19/01/09 07:27:29 (David)

Codes (5): [critical discourse analysis] [discourse characteristics] [lexis] [metaphors] [specialist vocabulary/jargon]

---

Code Family: MAT PPD programme

Created: 19/01/09 07:26:28 (David)

Codes (6): [artist as catalyst] [movement and sound] [non-formal learning] [playfulness and analysis] [role play exercise] [small group theory\artist as catalyst]

---

Code Family: Multi-agency collaboration

Created: 19/01/09 07:25:28 (David)

Codes (14): [Boundaries] [ecological psychology] [high risk management] [information sharing protocols] [joined up?] [models of childhood] [orientation society] [orientation: education] [orientation: health] [risk management] [role theory] [Skills] [Special needs] [Specialist languages]

---

Code Family: Policy

Created: 19/01/09 07:28:09 (David)

Codes (6): [bureaucratic v. professional] [development of children's centres] [micro-political narratives] [policy context] [recommendations] [risk management]

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Code Family: Practitioner-centred research

Created: 19/01/09 07:26:58 (David)

Codes (9): [action research] [focus group research] [group learning] [impact] [method] [observation and judgement] [reflective practice] [research]

cast of mind] [training]

---

Code Family: Woodlands Park

Created: 19/01/09 07:24:58 (David)

Codes (9): [ambiance] [creativity] [history] [inclusivity] [mission]  
[organisation] [risk management] [staff] [use of physical space]

In its 'network view' facility, the software has a built-in syntax that specifies the types of links available in the display options. The programme allows additions to the syntactical repertoire and we added two ('in tension with' and 'implies')

Code-Code Relations Editor

[Edited by: David 20/01/09]

ID	label 1	label 2	Menu	Type
ASSO	==	R	is associated with	symmetrical
BTP	[]	G	is part of	transitive
CAUSA	=>	N	is cause of	transitive
CONTRA	<==>	C	contradicts	symmetrical
DAVID 1	---->	T	is in tension with	symmetrical
DAVID 2	[&]	A	is assumed by	asymmetrical
IS A	is a	O	is a	transitive
NO NAME				symmetrical

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