

# ALARj

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Future Praxis  
Special Edition

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*ALARA is a strategic network of people interested or involved in using action learning and action research to generate collaborative learning, research and action that transforms workplaces, schools, colleges, universities, communities, voluntary organisations, governments and businesses.*

*ALARA's vision is that action learning and action research will be widely used and publicly shared by individuals and groups creating local and global change for the achievement of a more equitable, just, joyful, productive, peaceful and sustainable society.*

# **ALAR Journal**

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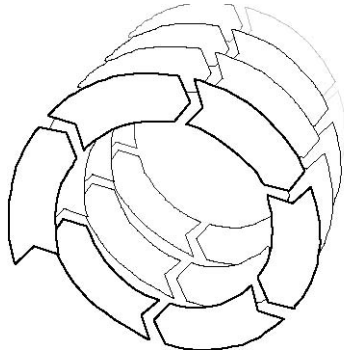
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## **CONTENTS**

<b>Editorial</b>	<b>2</b>
Susan Goff	
<b>Making Pedagogy Explicit in Ecological Leadership Praxis</b>	<b>4</b>
Catherine Etmanski and Tim Barss	
<b>A Voice in the Wilderness: The reflexivity of a homeless poet</b>	<b>37</b>
David Moxley, Dona Tatum and Olivia G.M. Washington	
<b>A Collaborative Inquiry: How do we, individually and collectively, integrate research and practice to improve the wellbeing of children?</b>	<b>65</b>
Joan Walton	
<b>Reflections on a Multi-Sector Action Research Collaboration: The researchers' perspectives</b>	<b>92</b>
Michael Cuthill, Jeni Warburton, Jo-Anne Everingham, Andrea Petriwiskyj and Helen Bartlett	
<b>But I'm Not Doing Action Research!</b>	<b>119</b>
Linda Henderson	
<b>ALARA membership and submission information</b>	<b>144</b>

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# Editorial

The first journal for 2011 is a special edition focussing on the theme of Future Praxis. How will Action Research and Action Learning serve the lives of future generations? How do contemporary practitioners craft such practices?

“Praxis” has origins in both Medieval Latin and Greek. Aristotle saw praxis as being practical knowledge that led to action incorporating ethics, politics and economics. In the action research “field”, Fals-Borda (1991) saw praxis as incorporating investigative with ideological and political practices: “the mere asking of a question in the field carries with it the commitment to act” (p157). Reason and Bradbury (2008) see praxis as changing the relationship between knowledge and practice to provide “a new model of social science of the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (8). Referencing Kemmis they emphasise the subjectivity of experience and inter-relationships within which our understandings of action become evident.

This special edition offers our readers an opportunity to dwell in these inter-subjective spaces with our authors as they craft their praxis before our eyes.

Catherine Etmanski and Tim Barss, Catherine as instructor and Tim as student educator, make their educational practices transparent to each other as they prepare communities for an environmentally distressed future.

Where for Etmanski and Barss co-inquiry into pedagogy forges inquiry praxis, in our next chapter it is thoughtful engagement with poetry that becomes the praxis of collaborative inquiry. Dona Tatem, offers her poetry to two sociologists, David Moxley and Olivia Washington, as a way of creating unique understandings about homelessness through the eyes of an older, Afro-American woman.

Whitehead's "Living Theory" is Joan Walton's theorisation of Action Research as she engages early childhood workers in questioning how they relate with children and their parents. Walton's mid-project analysis describes the workers coming to value themselves and each other, building their capacity to influence systemic difficulties as they do.

In our fourth paper, Michael Cuthill, Jeni Warburton, Jo-Anne Everingham, Andrea Petriwiskyj and Helen Bartlett also interested in systemic difficulties, work between the opposing necessities of participant flexibility and funder rigidity to arrive at an elegantly simple approach to Action Research practice in multi-sector initiatives.

Finally, Linda Henderson draws on Deleuzian concepts of Desire to walk between the micro-and macro political worlds of early childhood educators striving for visibility in a school environment. Where for Cuthill et al, praxis exists in the utilisation of different forms of capital, for Henderson it is in the understanding of desire as revolutionary production.

Each of the authors focuses on a crucial concern to our future: environment, quality of childhood, homelessness, wellbeing and ageing. Each creates with genuine intellectual originality a theory of their Action Research practice in distinctive future oriented, theoretical locations: pedagogy, literature, research methodology, governance and philosophy.

I join you in celebrating the creativity and courage of our field as represented by the contributors to this special edition and trust that their deliberations will inspire the reader's similar crafting of Future Praxis.

Dr Susan Goff

Managing Editor, *ALARj*



# Making Pedagogy Explicit in Ecological Leadership Praxis

Catherine Etmanski and Tim Barss

Written from the perspective of two educators, this article tells the story of how we have each applied the self-reflective cycles of action learning in our own workplace settings—what we have learned independently and in conversation with each other, and our shared vision for future praxis. Specifically, we focus on Tim’s journey of transformation and his ongoing shift from being a curriculum and teacher-centred educator toward a more student-centred pedagogical approach. In recounting this story, our purpose is not only to share our experiences, but also to suggest that for action-oriented curricula to elicit increased benefit, educators must intentionally prepare students for experiential learning activities. While the concept of praxis entails linking theory to action, in our vision for future praxis we argue that especially when Environmental Adult Education is taught in formal educational settings, not only must educators introduce ecological content knowledge, so too must they cover the pedagogy: its underlying participatory design and the implications of this design for a more just and democratic society.

## Prelude: Journal entry June 5, 2010

*As we arrived at the farm and I surveyed the Field (2008) I could see it was going to be a beautiful Sumner (2003) day. The grass was Dewey (1916) from the rain that had Follen (2010) overnight, the smell of Clover (2010) was in the air, and the bees were busily collecting Pollan (2008) from the Flowers (2009). This was going to be a nice break from the classroom or lecture Hall (2010); here we’d be able to clear our minds and not have to worry about ‘learning’ or ‘education’ for a while—just some good, hard, therapeutic farm work for the afternoon. We walked by some Greene (1995) bushes and past a wet, Marshke (2009) area. One of the volunteers who would be working with*

*us came a 'Whelen (2005) around the corner behind us in a pickup truck. In the back was the fencing we would be putting up to keep the deer from ravaging the organic garden which was just beginning to Bloom (1953). My partners and I began to plant fence posts and, after some initial uncertainty, quickly got good at our various roles in the process, mine being to tamp the soil down with a large Blunt (1992) object. One of my partners really got into shovelling the dirt, and I had to continually Warner (2006) not to get in the way of the tamp lest she get a big Welton (2001) her foot!*

*Next we began to pull the deer fencing Tight (1996) around the posts. After finishing three poles, one of my partners pointed out that she thought the fence was upside down. The resident farm worker looked closely and acknowledged that she was right. He then Grint (2006) at us all and confessed with easy Grace (2004) that “the beauty of farming is that nobody really Knowles (1990) precisely what they’re doing. You can’t be aFreired (2003) to make a mistake—you just try something and then see what worked and what didn’t so you can do it better the next time.” (This methodology seemed vaguely familiar, but I couldn’t quite place it). We discussed whether or not we thought the orientation of the fence was critical. Should we just carry on, Orr (1991) should we take it down and start again? The consensus was that redoing the section would Gough (n.d.) pretty fast now that we had some idea of what the Hill (2003) we were doing. We were right, and the fence went up Foster (2001) and Foster (2001) as we figured out how to deal with the different problem-posing scenarios at the various corners and obstacles. Sure enough, by the end of the day we had the fence Dunn (2010)! We celebrated our team accomplishment with a picture. The fence may not have been perfect, but the volunteer told us with a Sligh (2002) smile that the Main (2004) thing was that starting t’Morrow (1995) the deer wouldn’t be able to get into the garden any more.*

*As we left I had an odd feeling that I couldn’t put my Finger (1989) on. It was almost as though we had somehow **learned** something, which of course was an outLanderish (2005) notion since all we had done was have some fun together in the sun and build a fence around a garden. And here I thought this class was going to be about connecting the theory and practice of environmental education and leadership. Oh, well—at least I got a pretty good Tan (2003) out of the deal. (Adapted from Barss, 2010a)*

A good tan indeed...

## **Introduction**

This special edition of ALARj grapples with the issue of future praxis in light of how practitioners and theorists see the world and the value of participatory approaches to transformation. Readers in this field might take praxis to

mean the “dialectical tension between theorizing and practice or acting” (Moosa-Mitha, 2005, p. 50) or, more specifically, in the context of action-oriented approaches to research and learning, “a spiral of self-reflective cycles... [involving] planning a change, acting and observing the process and consequences of the change, reflecting on these processes and consequences; re-planning; acting and observing again, reflecting again, and so on” (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005, p. 276). Yet, beyond these iterative cycles that will lead us into next week or next year, what do we really mean by the future? Certainly our assumptions about the nature of future realities and what we suspect we will need to know to live well – sustainably, respectfully – in this future, determine, to a certain extent at least, how we live in the present: our current praxis.

Written from the perspective of two educators, this article tells the story of how we have each applied the self-reflective cycles of action learning in our own workplace settings – what we have learned independently and in conversation with each other, and our shared vision for future praxis. Specifically, we focus on Tim’s journey of transformation and his ongoing shift from being a curriculum and teacher-centred educator toward a more student-centred pedagogical approach. This transformation took place incrementally over the course of Tim’s graduate studies, but crystallized in the context of an Ecological Leadership course he took with Catherine as his instructor. Following the completion of his degree, he took immediate action by designing an Environmental Stewardship course, inspired largely by the pedagogy of Environmental Adult Education (EAE) employed in Catherine’s course.

In recounting this story, our purpose is not only to share our experiences, but also to suggest that for action-oriented curricula to elicit increased benefit, educators must intentionally prepare students for experiential learning activities. While the concept of praxis entails linking theory

to action, in our vision for future praxis we argue that especially when EAE is taught in formal educational settings, not only must educators introduce ecological content knowledge, so too must they cover the pedagogy of Environmental Adult Education: its underlying participatory design and the implications of this design for a more just and democratic society. If not sufficiently prepared and subsequently unpacked, learners may indeed interpret hands-on learning experiences as “having fun in the sun” (as Barss, 2010a suggested above – albeit with tongue in cheek), but may miss the intention behind the design, and the theoretical connection to traditions of action-oriented research and learning.

Our story begins by situating ourselves ontologically in terms of our underlying beliefs about the nature of reality, and how this shapes what we envision as future praxis. We then locate Environmental Adult Education in the context of action-oriented learning and research, followed by a snapshot into each of our intersecting self-reflective cycles of praxis. In the subsequent section we discuss how the simultaneous engagement with theory and action enabled a more complete understanding of action-oriented learning for Tim. It also facilitated the immediate application of theory to his work as an educator following the course. In our call for future praxis, we discuss what we might do, within the confines of one course, to support students not only in *learning how to learn* in new ways, but also learning how to *think, do, be and know* in new ways. We close with reflections on our lingering concerns and an urgent call for transformation and action.

## **Envisioning the future: The ecological context**

As researchers and educators, we often encourage ourselves and our students to examine our underlying philosophies of how we know what we know and starting assumptions about the nature of truth, our very existence, and our ways

of being in material and (if we venture to go there) non-material realities. In exploring this question of future praxis, then, it is useful to have some ontological starting point about what we actually imagine the future to be. What might our future reality hold, and what might our future way of being entail?

As educators and citizens who care about both humanity and the human impact on “the rest of nature” (Clover, Jayme, Follen & Hall, 2010, p. 19) we acknowledge up front that we have certain beliefs about reality that inform our current practice as educators. These beliefs merge an admittedly post-positivist perspective about a so-called ‘real’ reality, “but only imperfectly and probabilistically apprehensible” (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 193). They have a critical orientation toward action, and a constructivist orientation toward participation. The post-positivist perspective includes predictions about the future based on available information about the present state of Earth-human relations. To us there exists an abundance of evidence on changes to this planet, documented in scientific publications, government commissioned studies, media reports, documentary films, and direct observations by ourselves and people we trust. This evidence suggests that life on this planet, for all species, is becoming increasingly unstable.

By way of example, according to a 2010 report, today some 700 million people face water scarcity (defined as less than 1,000 cubic meters per person per year), which could grow to 3 billion by 2025 due to climate change, population growth, and increasing demand for water per capita – approximately 80% of diseases in the Majority world are water-related (Glenn, Gordon & Florescu, 2010). In 2009, the World Food Programme reported that the number of undernourished people worldwide increased to 1.02 billion, the highest number reported to date (Hansen, 2009, p. 3). The International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources asserts that 16,928 species are threatened with

extinction, 3,246 of which are listed as Critically Endangered, 4,770 as Endangered, and 8,912 as Vulnerable (Vl e, Hilton-Taylor & Stuart, 2009, p. 16). And this without touching in any depth on the ecological impact of warfare, industry, as well as the inequitable lifestyle and consumption habits of a wealthy Minority of the world's population (Bowers, 2005, p. 152). These are, of course, but a few socio-ecological challenges of our time.

This, at times, overwhelming fact-based view of material reality merges with a critical perspective that "the world is not OK" (Hall, 2001, p. 177) – that it is fundamentally organized in a way that benefits some humans more than others. This critical, anti-oppressive stance is informed by an intersectional lens; that is, we recognize "the interweaving of oppressions on the basis of multiple social identities" (Moosa-Mitha, 2005, p. 62) not a singular lens such as race, class, or gender. From this we, like other action-oriented researchers and educators, feel a deep sense of responsibility to work for social change. Therefore, while the future may be uncertain, we believe it will likely include increasing ecological devastation and that this devastation will disproportionately affect populations who are already vulnerable (e.g. Magzul 2009's study of constraints faced by the Blood Tribe Indigenous population in Canada in adapting to changes in climate). Even if our state of affairs were to remain stable, clearly there are enough global challenges to address right now. The key question – indeed the question this special issue addresses – is, how?

Here is where our epistemological perspective shifts from one of knowing, to a more humble position of knowing that we simply *don't know* the panacea for the complex, interconnected challenges we currently face. In admitting that we don't know, we also suspect we need to unlearn some of the knowledge that has already caused much harm; knowledge and ways of being that are responsible for potentially moving our species toward self-destruction. As

Albert Einstein is said to have famously mused, the problems that exist in the world today cannot be solved by the level of consciousness that created them. If there is truth in this statement, then until we can say with confidence that we embody a more enlightened consciousness, we continue to be part of the problem. An epistemological position of *not knowing*, we believe, encourages a step away from the hubris that has characterized much of Western science, and sanctioned the colonization and dominance of other ways of thinking, doing, being, and knowing.

As educators, then, we find ourselves in a position of drawing upon what we do know, about both education and the state of human-Earth relations, to facilitate an exploration of what we do not yet know and of actions that we (and our students, or participants in co-learning) have not yet imagined. In other words, we are seeking ways to teach what we don't yet know. It is here that our constructivist orientation toward participation takes shape, and with it a practice of co-constructing new knowledge with fellow human beings and also with a desire to "imagine a process of co-creating knowledge that might happen between ourselves and other forms of life, other species, trees, grasses, and rocks" (Hall, 2005, p.21).

With these starting assumptions about the future along with our state of (un)knowing, our vision for future praxis entails facilitating an exploration into the unknown in our work as educators; that is, endeavouring to create conditions for the "emergence of novelty" (Capra, 2002, p. 119). Based on our joint reflection on Tim's experience, we believe that the action-oriented, participatory approach to learning upon which Catherine drew (Environmental Adult Education, discussed in more depth below) contributed to the conditions for Tim's perspective transformation. Moreover, Tim's experience suggests that intentional study of the theory behind the experiential course design was key to this transformation. Finally, we can support participants' future

praxis by encouraging them to take action within their own spheres of influence, based on their own uniquely transformed perspectives.

## **Environmental adult education: An action-oriented approach to learning and research**

The family of action-oriented approaches to both research and learning “draw from a broad spectrum of methodologies and methods and build on traditions from many parts of the world” (Etmanski & Pant, 2007, p. 277). These traditions include, but are not limited to Participatory Research (e.g. Hall, 2005), Community Action Research (e.g. Reitsma-Street & Brown, 2004), Community-Based Participatory Research (e.g. Israel, Schultz, Parker, Becker, Allen III & Guzman, 2003), Engaged Scholarship (e.g. Fitzgerald, Burak & Seifer, 2010). The term ‘Action Research’ is typically traced back Kurt Lewin’s work in the United States during the 1940s, but also links to Critical and Emancipatory approaches to Research that emerged around the globe in the 1970s and 80s, as well as various models of Action Learning, Classroom Action Learning, and Action Science (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). Zuber-Skerritt (2002) specifically defines Action Learning 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. It is a process by which groups of people (whether managers, academics, teachers, students, or ‘learners’ generally) address actual... issues or problems, in complex situations and conditions (pp. 114-115).

Environmental Adult Education is a variation of Action Learning, and in this section we identify the lineage of EAE within this far-reaching family tree.

*Environmental Adult Education (EAE)*

In addition to the Action Research tradition based on workplace (especially school) settings (Kemmis &



McTaggart, 2005; Stringer, 1996), Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoeker & Donohue (2003) suggest that there are two other historical traditions from which this family of work draws: the *popular education model* and what they refer to as the *participatory research model* (p. 6). While the former has been strongly influenced by the work of educators such as Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, the latter is an approach to research that developed largely outside of – and originally in opposition to – academic institutions. This line of Participatory Research was conceptualized by a global network of Adult Education practitioners, particularly educators in the geographic South (Brown & Tandon, 1983; Reason & Bradbury, 2001; Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoeker & Donohue, 2003; Wallerstein, 1999). In combining popular education with participatory research, Environmental Adult Education (EAE) is an offshoot these two traditions.

O’Sullivan (1999) argued that historically: “one of the most prominent omissions in the critical approach to education... is its lack of attention to ecological issues” (p. 63).

O’Sullivan critiqued the anthropocentric focus of even the most progressive counter-hegemonic educators. He was not alone in this observation, thus the emergence of the specific tradition of EAE. As the name suggests, the practice of EAE has emerged from the cross-pollination of *Adult Education* and *Environmental Education*. Adult Education, according to Clover, Follen & Hall (2000), “includes all experiences with emphasis on critical analysis focused on social change through people’s active involvement” (pp. 10-11). While facilitators play a key role in organizing the learning, Adult Education settings resist, as much as possible, rigidly predetermined or standardized curricula and allow learners to form their own meanings based on their personal experiences and life circumstances, all the while endeavouring to incorporate creativity, imagination, humour, and fun (Clover, Jayme, Follen & Hall, 2010).

It exemplifies the principles of Action Learning by focusing on:

- Facilitating experiential learning rather than top-down knowledge transmission;
- A 'spiral design model' (Arnold, Burke, James, Martin & Thomas, 1991) of praxis, which starts with reflection on participants' experiences, seeks patterns in those experiences, draws upon theory, and leads participants toward a plan for action in their own contexts;
- Active participation, namely, an intention for participants to have much control over the process, from problem definition to design and dissemination or implementation of lessons learned; and
- A critical perspective that situates Environmental Education within a context of global social justice. (Clover, Jayme, Follen & Hall, 2010).

In addition to these Action Learning principles, EAE specifically recognizes and values Indigenous ways of thinking, doing, knowing and being and endeavours to challenge the Western Worldview, as we touch upon below.

Rees (1990) argues that Cartesian subject-object dualism has promoted a division between humans and our environment, which leads to the objectification of nature and endless extraction of resources without any thought of long-term consequence:

...in effect, the concept of the environment as a separate entity is a human invention... Functionally speaking, there is only a single entity, the biosphere, and humanity has always been part of it (p. 19).

The unconscious promotion of this Western dualism, in turn, contributes to the global environmental crisis by devaluing, "cultures that have developed complex systems of interspecies communication and reciprocity with the natural world" (Bowers, 2005, p. 149).

In a collection of essays edited by Bowers & Apffel-Marglin (2005), further criticism is levelled at the Western view of the individual as the “base unit” (p. xiii), which stands in contrast to more collectively-oriented worldviews. Focus on emancipation of the individual and the need for each generation to “rename the world” (p. xi) can undermine intergenerational knowledge and, thus, more indigenous approaches to community renewal. Sumner (2003) draws further attention to the Western mindset of individualism and its connection to the current global crisis. She argues that we need a new framework that moves away from the individual orientation and replaces it with “an understanding of sustainability as a set of structures and processes that build the civil commons” (p. 44). Whether an appropriate level of individual autonomy may still have its place in global civil society is up for debate; nevertheless, a more community-minded orientation is certainly promoted within EAE practices.

The above theoretical framework positions Environmental Adult Education within the larger field of action-oriented approaches to learning and underlines EAE’s emphasis on challenging the Western Worldview. With this background in mind, we turn now to an overview of how we, the authors, are each attempting to learn, teach, and facilitate a deeper understanding of this theory in the context of our respective classrooms.

### **Methodology: Intersecting spirals of action and reflection**

In 2006, Haugen singled out the *training of Environmental Adult Educators* as a significant gap in the field of EAE. Central to the discussion of training is Vella’s (1994) belief that “we teach the way we were taught” (as cited in Haugen, 2006, p. 95). With an understanding of Environmental Adult Education and a desire to take action within our own spheres of influence, we each designed an experimental EAE

curriculum tailored to our unique educational settings. Following McNiff (2006), we suggest that our stories are our living educational theories. As such, this methodology section outlines *the way* we each chose to take action by narrating our experiences: from curriculum design to implementation for Catherine, and from experiential learning to curriculum design for Tim.

*Catherine's narrative*

Prior to designing this course, my lifelong interest in Environmental issues was more personal than academic. While I have participated in several Ecology and Sustainability-related courses over the years, my research focus had been elsewhere. While I did have a critical understanding of the inequitable distribution of both pollution and access to clean water, air, and food, I did not investigate ecological issues in any depth until I began volunteering part-time on an organic farm following the completion of my doctoral studies.

Shortly thereafter, during one of my first graduate level teaching assignments, I found myself teaching about Sustainable Leadership (Hargreaves & Fink, 2005; Orr, 1991) and Indigenous Leadership (Atleo, 2004; Warner & Grint, 2006) as part of a survey of literature in the vast, multi-disciplinary field of Educational Leadership. For one offering of this introductory Master's level course, I organized a site visit to the farm at which I had volunteered – an excursion in which Tim participated. Through observing students' interaction with course materials, and hearing enthusiastic responses to this site visit, I perceived quite clearly that there was a mutual desire to delve further into issues related to Ecological Leadership. Supported by my department, and inspired by both the students' and my own interests, I decided to take action, and set out to design a course on Ecological Leadership for Educators.

A challenge any educator must face, of course, is deciding what – of the large number of potential topics to cover and perspectives or materials available – to include. Given my belief that “the way learning occurs is as important as the content” (Orr, 1991, para. 25), my intention with this course was to create a learning environment that bridged theoretical with hands-on learning and a classroom setting with outdoor education. Moreover, I hoped the curriculum would enable students to pursue useful avenues related to their own life circumstances and interests, while ensuring they were exposed to contemporary environmental issues ranging from Biodiversity and Seed Saving to Climate Change, Conservation, Eco-Feminism, Food and Water Security, the Green Economy and Greenwashing, Off the Grid Alternatives, Peak Oil, Permaculture, the Role of the Arts in Environmental Movements, Traditional Ecological Knowledge, Transportation Infrastructure, and much more – including, Environmental Adult Education.

Some aspects of the syllabus followed traditional academic norms, while others intentionally tried to move away from them. The classroom format included guest speakers, site visits to on- and off-campus sustainability initiatives, small and large group discussions, individual and collaborative work, the independent study of film and text, learning journals, and an annotated bibliography. For their final assignment, I encouraged students to plan for action in their own contexts.

Right from the start, I had the explicit desire to encourage among all of us a deep personal and philosophical reflection on our beliefs and ways of being in the world. As such, I opened the class with ontological, epistemological, and arguably moral questions such as:

*How do you know when something is true? What, from your perspective, is the nature of reality? As humans, what is our overarching purpose here on planet Earth? And, simply because*

*we have the ability to dominate, does that give us the inherent right to do so?*

I had a further interest in situating our ecological discussions within a critical, intersectional framework: one that recognized overlapping axes of power and privilege, including race, class, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability, age, language, religion, global location, and more. Following the tenets of Adult Education, I encouraged learners to observe structures and systems that impact individual behaviours and to understand the extent to which we are all implicated in and bear some responsibility for the challenges under investigation in the class.

Knowing from my own experience of working on the farm that witnessing tangible results of outdoor physical labour can be powerful (specifically, I might add, for academically-inclined, middle class city dwellers), I organized a work party at a local farm. (This is the fence-building excursion Tim describes in the prelude above). I had hoped that this would be a concrete way for us to take collective action, and, in a small way, support our local community.

Finally, I included experiential activities related to feeling energetic connections with others, and encouraged people to explore how various spiritual and healing traditions from around the world could inform ecological leadership praxis. The inclusion of these activities and discussions felt risky for me in an academic environment still dominated by rational thought. In spite of this risk, some students (including Tim) picked up on the connections, and were even able to represent their findings in more creative and multi-media formats – a practice encouraged by Whitehead (2010) as well. (Tim’s journal entry above is an example of one of his creative representations of his increasing understanding of action-oriented learning.)

Planning and implementing this course was part of the cycle of my own praxis and in anticipation of the next course

offering, I have been reflecting on the course experience. I wondered how or whether students would integrate and apply what they learned in this class, and then, a few months later, I received word from Tim.

*Tim's narrative*

Last spring, as one of the final electives in my Masters programme, I signed up for Catherine's course: *Ecological Leadership for Educators*. My reasons for enrolling were varied. First, I do certainly have an interest in environmental issues, leadership, and education, and consider myself a reasonably environmentally conscientious person. This course, I thought, might offer some insight into how to make better choices in a field that often presents confusing or overwhelming dilemmas. Second, having had Catherine as an instructor before, I knew that I enjoyed her teaching style and the atmosphere fostered within her classes. Third, I had a vague understanding that the course was to include a number of excursions that would take us out of the classroom and into natural settings where we would meet individuals and communities making a difference environmentally. The latter seemed to be not only an interesting contrast to the typical educational setting, but also promised to provide an enjoyable social dynamic with classmates. While I certainly looked forward to the course, I confess that at the outset I could not imagine any direct connection to my professional practice. Rather, I expected a pleasant diversion from the practical focus of much of my graduate work which, to that point, had directly related to my teaching assignment in Math and Theatre.

Fast forward six months. I am working on a course design for a new Environmental Stewardship course with curriculum modeled almost exclusively on my experiences in *Ecological Leadership for Educators*, including many of the same themes, objectives, activities, learning strategies, and even site visits. I have recently submitted a proposal, which was enthusiastically approved, to the Administration and

Department Heads at my school to implement this course for the next school year. What occurred in the interim to plant the seed in my head that Ecological Leadership and Action Learning are topics I could (and would want to) incorporate into my daily teaching role?

The course certainly lived up to my expectations. It was interesting, engaging, pleasantly atypical, and (not least of all) fun. The content was varied, from an afternoon with a local First Nations artist to a discussion with a land conservationist, from a visit to an organic farm to a nature hike with a guide pointing out native plants and their uses, from the campus bicycle kitchen to a clean water project in Guatemala, and from hope for potential solutions just on the horizon to despair about the magnitude of the crisis our world faces. On any given day we could just as easily be conducting an academic class discussion on “The Tragedy of the Commons” (Hardin, 1968) as digging fencepost holes for community garden at a rural transition house. The interaction of these various aspects, settings, styles, and activities of the course was certainly one of the key factors in the type of action learning that transformed my detached interest in the subject to a desire to implement a similar program at my school.

In the proposal submitted to Department Heads, I explain that I envision the course not as merely learning ‘about’ environmental issues. Rather, it is “learning with, through, and in” (Clover, 2006, p. 53) the local environment, and, moreover, that the course is to be founded on three pillars: Education, Critique, and Action.

Bound to this approach are two significant shifts in my educational philosophy. First is a shift from a teacher-dictated, top-down posture to a more student centred outlook – one that recognizes that “we learn best by beginning with our daily lived experience in our own locations, contexts and histories” (Clover, Follen & Hall, 2000, p. 23). Second is a shift from a linear, knowledge-based,



and content-driven model of learning (Freire's banking concept) to an action-oriented vision of learning based on "iterative cycles of action and reflection" (Coughlan & Coughlan, 2010, p. 200). My teaching style to this point in my career has tended toward the traditional. If a few years ago the administrative team had come to me and said they were running an Environmental Studies course and (for some reason!) needed me to teach it, I suspect I would have taken a typical content-driven, teacher-directed approach with, perhaps, a few token projects and service activities. This is a far cry from the atmosphere I hope to foster next year, and the underpinnings of this personal transformation are a central theme to the discussion and conclusions of this article.

In Catherine's class, the atmosphere described above gave rise to an extraordinary educational experience for my classmates and for me – an atmosphere I now hope to recreate as a teacher. However, as we have attempted to deconstruct together, through the writing of this article, the dynamics at play in my particular "action-reflection-action cycle" (Hernandez, 1998, p. 270), an additional component has emerged which we believe played a critical role in my personal journey.

This factor was the *explicit study of the methodology being employed within the course*. On the first day of class each student was assigned, through random selection, a specific research topic for an Annotated Bibliography assignment. The topic I selected was Environmental Adult Education (EAE). I thus found myself not only *experiencing* the action-learning approaches employed by Catherine, but simultaneously *researching, writing, and reflecting upon* the methodology behind the activities and techniques taking place in class. This, I believe, was essential to my ultimate recognition that this type of learning approach was one I would like to take back and put into action within my own practice and professional setting.

It is perhaps useful to be clear that, as is often the case in significant transformations, my interest in and understanding of the philosophical shifts I feel I am undergoing has been in process for many years and is still far from complete (if, indeed, such things ever are 'complete'). I have had the good fortune to work with several educators who, without specifically using the terms 'Action Learning' or 'Adult Education' or even being aware (to my knowledge) of the bodies of work in these fields, nonetheless employ Action Learning strategies within the high school setting quite successfully. I have admired, respected, and even attempted to emulate these individuals without ever having had a clear understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of what was going on.

Further, when my graduate work began I was introduced to the theory of Adult Education in the very first course in my Master's programme and subsequently experienced numerous examples of how it could be applied in a classroom setting. However, it was not until I was researching the specific theory of EAE while practising it, quite literally, in the field that I had my "Ah-ha" moment. It was then that I understood the full intention behind Catherine's course design and could see its potential application elsewhere. Supported by the knowledge that "certain theorists, such as Alan Rogers (1996), define adult education in terms of whether or not the students are *treated* as adults... capable, experienced, responsible, mature and balanced people" (Kelly & Perkett, 1998, para. 5, emphasis added), I came to understand that Adult Education was not just about 'teaching adults'; it was in fact a way of *facilitating learning* that could equally be practised with *anybody*, including the secondary school students who are the focus of my professional attention.

## Discussion: Lessons learned and lingering contradictions

From these two narratives, the reader might glean that both of us have been learning throughout our overlapping cycles of Action Learning. For example, in observing Tim's clear understanding of how content was linked to process, Catherine learned the value of his explicit investigation into the pedagogy of Environmental Adult Education during this class. At the same time, Tim, in observing Catherine's facilitation, gained a deeper appreciation of EAE pedagogy, which influenced his shift toward more action-oriented and student-centred teaching. In what follows we share what we have since learned together through our reflection on this experience.

### *Making pedagogy explicit*

As suggested above, we have come to believe that Tim's explicit study of the theory of EAE while simultaneously experiencing it in action played a significant role in the action-learning process in this situation. As a result, as part of Catherine's plan for future praxis, she has decided to allot more class time to in-depth study of the theory, in conjunction with ongoing meta-analysis and the active reflection in the form of learning journals on *why they are doing what they are doing* (Walter, 2009). In the first offering, Catherine did provide a basic overview and some explicit commentary. However, the theoretical study and systematic reflection she intends to facilitate this time around will take up significantly more space in the agenda, both at the start and the end of the class – a design that adds the explicit study of EAE pedagogy to the course content.

Based on Tim's experience, and Catherine's earlier experiences when she was first learning about action-oriented pedagogies, we believe that the explicit study of theory will support students in developing an expectation that if they know to look they will discover their own links

between the various components (academic, reflective, and participatory or action-oriented) at play in their learning environment. Moreover, a clear understanding that action-oriented approaches such as EAE specifically strive to *move away from teacher dictated content* can free students from the perception – all too common in traditional educational settings – that their role as students is to attempt to decipher what exactly their teacher “wants” them to learn.

Haugen (2006) distinctively warns of the temptation, both on behalf of educators and learners, to expect a didactic, top-down approach in which the educators have a set of predetermined learning outcomes for students to master. While the protocols of working within an academic institution remain intact, the objectives Catherine laid out for the course were more exploratory, community-building, and action-oriented in nature.

Tim recalls that as his understanding of EAE pedagogy increased, he experienced a growing confidence in being open to learning from unexpected connections between the content of the course, the participatory and action-oriented experiences of the class, and practical applications to his personal and professional situation. (The irony is not lost on us that this is, of course, exactly what Catherine as the instructor “wanted” and encouraged her students to do – a contradiction that remains unresolved.) Indeed, the symbolic connections available in any situation provide ongoing opportunities for lifelong learning; thus, *learning how to learn* in this way might not simply be an anecdotal experience in one class, but also a useful life skill.

In some cases, the result of this openness to unexpected connections may simply be to add a new dimension to students’ understanding of some concept or process. From our experience, specific examples of this might include the comparison (in the journal entry which opened this article) of Freirean methodology to a worker’s description of how to run a farm, or an observation (shared by Catherine and Tim

during a site visit) on the parallel between the organic process of building a cob house and the unexpected creations that can emerge with other arts-based processes.

In Tim's case, however, the *explicit understanding* that action-oriented approaches *encourage learning to be applied in the context of one's own situation* provided the necessary catalyst for the transformation that had a lasting effect on his professional life. One specific example of this was Tim's unexpected linkage of EAE methodology with Theatre Education, a theme which ultimately provided the basis for his Master's work (Barss, 2010b). Of course, Tim's growing realisation – discussed in his narrative – that a participatory, action-oriented approach to learning could potentially be employed to great effect within a high school setting is another illustration. This provided the critical seed that eventually matured into his proposal for an Environmental Stewardship course, based on the precepts of EAE, at his school.

### **Exploring the limits to our knowing: Is making pedagogy explicit enough?**

This article has provided an account of our intersecting cycles of action and reflection. For Catherine this included new learning through her work on an organic farm, and taking action by planning a course based on that learning. She then taught that course and observed how students interacted with the design. Tim's reflections on his experiences in the course are helping Catherine to better understand the consequences of her design, and plan for the next course cycle.

Linked to Catherine's cyclical process, of course, is Tim's emergent cycle of praxis. He gained a new understanding of action-oriented and participatory methodology to learning throughout his graduate studies, and is now in the process of planning for action in his own school setting. His proposal for an Environmental Stewardship course has been approved

for next year and simply awaits endorsement (through sufficient enrolment numbers) on behalf of the students. Indeed, the reflective exercise of co-authoring this article has encouraged him to bring greater intentionality to other areas where he was already experimenting with Action Learning approaches, both in terms of his own thinking and in terms of making this pedagogy explicit to students.

Thus, in the slow way that education socialises us and moves us toward social change, these courses (and others like them) will take their effect. Our plan to make pedagogy explicit in our future praxis, we hope, will encourage this movement. Yet we cannot help but wonder, in light of the global ecological challenges already upon us, is this really enough? Are high impact polluters and consumers in the ineptly named “developed” world ready to willingly surrender our transnational corporate models and globally privileged lifestyles? As one of the students remarked, “we are well past the time for *starting with people’s experiences*” (K. McGurran, pers. comm., June 18, 2010; quoted with permission). Although we know there is only so much one summer intensive course can hope to accomplish beyond slightly raised (or even transformed) consciousness, it must still be acknowledged that we did not take direct political action, nor did we immediately affect the inequitable global social arrangements from which we the authors, and most students in our classrooms, continue to benefit.

These sentiments are indeed understood and appreciated by Environmental Adult Educators, for instance Clover’s (2003) acknowledgement that, in terms of effective large-scale environmental action, there is “no substitute for democratic governance. And the political arena remains the space where most of the power lies” (p. 13). When it comes to legislation and policy change, corporations and individuals who lose some of their power to pollute may perceive these structural approaches to environmental sustainability as more top-down than the methods of EAE would suggest.

Implicit in our above discussion on pedagogy is the possibility that consciousness, both our own and our students', might be transformed as we continue to ask ourselves questions such as, " 'How can I improve my practice?' and 'How do I help you improve your learning' and 'How do I live my values more fully in my practice?'" (Whitehead, 1998, p. 4).

As such, it seems that not only must we work and educate toward structural, global policy level and ideological change, we must also endeavour to continue to transform our own ways of thinking, doing, being, and knowing. We believe that our work to foster meaningful relationships, a sense of community, and more democratic governance inside the classroom (the "atmosphere" Tim describes in his narrative) moves us in this direction in that it creates the conditions for co-constructing new knowledge, and the emergence of the unknown (as discussed at the outset).

In our future praxis, this too, is part of the pedagogy we can make even more explicit, especially in how it translates into society beyond classroom walls. Yet a "fundamental transformation of human-Earth relations" (Clover, Jayme, Follen & Hall, 2010, pp. 35-36) requires reflection at a deep, personal level, and an acknowledgement that the social world in which we live does not exist in some absolute sense, but rather is simply one model of reality, the consequence of one set of intellectual and spiritual choices that our particular cultural lineage made, however successfully, many generations ago (Davis, 2009, pp. 1-2).

In our classrooms, then, we can continue our efforts to deconstruct the 'intellectual and spiritual choices' of our own and our students' cultural lineage, through reflective questions such as the ones Catherine used to frame the class (in her narrative section), and a variety of curricular activities including interactions with local Indigenous leaders.

However, as suggested by Bowers (2005), critical reflection is not “the only approach to knowledge” (p. ix) and thus, a rational, systematic deconstruction alone will only take us so far – as will revolutionary calls for structural change, which are deeply imbued with Western critical theories. Certainly, Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators are already collaborating in experiments to promote not only personal transformation and decolonisation, but also fundamental shifts in how curriculum is delivered within the confines of academic institutions (see, Williams & Tanaka, 2007, for an excellent example). Likewise, if indeed “we are all artists, poets, storytellers, songwriters, dreamers, and more” (Clover, Follen & Hall, 2000, p. 23), then we will continue looking to the arts to help us create the conditions for our own and our students’ potential transformation and exploration of the unknown. As Becker (1994), citing Marcuse, writes:

If ‘art cannot change the world,’ it can help to change ‘the consciousness and drives of the men and women who would change the world’ (Marcuse, 1978, p. 32). It might appeal to those who see through the veil of Maya, who move beyond the myths of their own civilization (p. 126).

If our intention is to promote previously unimagined ways of thinking, doing, being, and knowing, then Environmental Adult Educators’ longstanding call for promoting creativity and the arts becomes ever more poignant.

## **Conclusions and future praxis**

A sense of urgency toward the current ecological crisis has not yet reached critical mass among the comfortable global elite. In the meantime, people around the world are already suffering, and this suffering will no doubt continue as climates change and ocean levels rise alongside rising pollution of our air, water, and food; deforestation, top soil erosion, oil supply decline – not to mention species and community displacement to make way for landfills, large-



scale infrastructure, increasing resource extraction, warfare, and, sadly, fences.

Whether or not our species will survive is yet to be seen; whether or not we ought to is, perhaps, open to debate. If we are to survive, and if we are to do so with any measure of compassion for each other and for the Earth, it seems that the task before us demands no less than a massive shift in human consciousness; a level of awareness that is still largely unknown. It is our hope that, by acknowledging and exploring such unknowns in our classrooms, we as educators may foster conditions in which the “emergence of novelty” (Capra, 2002, p. 119) leads to new understandings, new ways of knowing, and new ways of imagining how to live sustainably, respectfully, and peacefully with the rest of nature. Whether we can achieve this on our own, or whether the Earth will encourage a shift through not-so-subtle messages, is yet to be seen.

This paper has provided a vision of Ecological Leadership for Educators that draws largely from Environmental Adult Education. In sharing the story of our experiences, we have suggested that helping students to understand not just the content itself, but also the theory behind the method, can create the conditions for both transformation and action. Now and in the future, we will continue our efforts to empower “people to see themselves as agents of socio-environmental change” (Clover, Jayme, Follen & Hall, 2010, p. 36) while looking to artists – and to those among us who have already figured out how to live in harmony with the rest of nature – for inspiration and hope.

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# **A Voice in the Wilderness: The reflexivity of a homeless poet**

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In this paper the authors, two academics, and a poet (the second author) who collaborated in a Participatory Action Research project, consider how poetry contributes to knowledge formation of homelessness among older African American women by amplifying reflexivity and fostering an integration of theory and practice. The authors view poetry as a form of knowledge, and consider the role of poet as witness. They engage Dona's poetry which she authored while homeless for three years, and which serves as an important way for researchers and lay people to better understand homelessness among older African American women. The authors discuss Dona's work as a form of witnessing and demonstrate her contribution to forming a reflexivity and praxis of homelessness.

## **Introduction**

Poetry captures the human imagination and provides a way for people to communicate their inner most feelings and perceptions, and to characterize their relationships with society, nature, or the cosmos. Oftentimes poets convey this communication in the form of the sublime using image and metaphor, rhythm, language and literary devices to portray meaningful experiences. Poetry can be deeply personal, and it enables people to express themselves in ways that alternative forms of communication cannot offer.

Within the social sciences poetry serves as a form of qualitative inquiry helping researchers to better understand a phenomenon in rich and evocative ways that give insight into how people portray or otherwise interpret their situations and experiences imbued with their emotions and from their perspective (Barry, 1996; Brady, 2000; Brearley, 2000; Carr, 2003). Poetry, poets, and poems offer researchers a portal through which they can come to better understand the human state and human response to conditions such as aging, disability, disease, ill health, life transitions, and social displacement or marginalization (Beatson & Prelock, 2002; Becker, 1999; Cannon, 2002; Furman, 2004, 2006; Kendall & Scott, 2005; Killick, 1999; Malekoff, 2004). Increasingly poetry is becoming a tool for the helping professions in which therapists use poems as a means of assisting people to express their concerns and their experiences associated with confronting life challenges. A helping process or intervention developed for people seeking help with life challenges may incorporate poetry as a tool to help them communicate lived experiences in ways that can surpass the power of therapeutic dialogue alone (Hatcher, 2000).

Poetry connects imagination, portrayal, and interpretation. Those who use poetry as a vehicle of representation and self-expression can experiment and innovate in ways that more traditional textual forms do not allow. In Action Research, poetry may serve as a means for inviting people who are not comfortable with traditional academic forms of inquiry to amplify their voice and perspective. From this standpoint, poetry can invite, welcome and engage individuals who otherwise may be reticent to participate in more traditional forms of research, particularly those that require the person to be passive and reactive. Instead, poetry offers active engagement and does not favour passivity.

Poetry offers the Action Researcher an alternative way of knowing that is useful in appreciating the perspective of a person who has experienced a challenging situation. For the

Action Researcher and for the participant poetry may strengthen or expand in that it illuminates in a critical manner both the core properties of a given situation and potential course of action to respond effectively to the situation. As a process of gaining insight and forming action, reflexivity can expand awareness and perspective and facilitate the further development of the self as a product of gaining insight into one's circumstances (D'Cruz, Gillingham & Melendez, 2007). In this manner, poetry is a form of action, and the knowledge it can - relative to situation, context, social structure, and development of self - amplify its power for altering perception and fostering insight whether on the part of a researcher or participant or both working in tandem.

In this paper the authors, two academic researchers and a poet (the second author), consider the latter's experience in midlife as a homeless person through the lens of her poetry. The authors consider the power of poetry by first placing it in a greater societal context, followed by Dona's poetic construction of her homelessness. The authors' aims are ultimately to better appreciate how poetry clarifies aspects of traumatic experience than what more traditional approaches to inquiry can illuminate.

Dona both engages and embodies homelessness through her poetry and communicates her experience of homelessness in an evocative manner. Through her voice Action Researchers not only come to better understand how an African American woman experiences homelessness at mid-life, but also how poetry serves as a vehicle for producing insight into this serious human challenge. Dona not only serves as a witness of her own homelessness and that of others she met during her journey but she also offers an action-oriented way of better understanding homelessness as a serious social issue. For Dona poetry is empowering and it gives her voice. It permits members of marginalized populations (e.g., Dona) to engage in dialogue about circumstances that impact their

lives and allows them to express their pent-up feelings. Dona's empowering poetry allows her to amplify her perspective, and assert the reality she has experienced firsthand.

Poetry also tells a story which holds certain integrity for the storyteller and encapsulates data, facts, information, and interpretation. It can serve as a primary vehicle for witnessing while its lyrical quality engages people in ways that other forms of communication cannot.

The act of witnessing is familiar to African American life ways, as bearing witness or providing testimony includes attesting to an experience, fact or event of which one has firsthand knowledge (e.g., circumstances, problems and reasons that older African American women are forced or chose to become homeless; Bridges, 2001). Consequently witnessing permits face-to-face contact with participants to obtain meaningful information that is often overlooked with large-scale survey methods.

### **The poet as witness**

The poet's role is unique in society, often times serving as a point of departure for those who amplify what is not right about a set of circumstances or affairs. As literary creation, and as a product of the self actively searching for meaning, poetry can serve as a tool for interpretation. Poetry also can underscore the strength of criticism concerning social arrangements and the implications of exposing social adversity. To illustrate, in response to First Lady Laura Bush's 2003 call for poetry commemorating "Poetry and the American Voice," many poets amplified through lyrical presentations their protest against the American invasion of Iraq.

Some 11,000 poets amplified their voices and moral consciousness by contributing over 13,000 poems questioning the ethical basis of the war and expressing their

aversion to it. As Hamill (2003) emphasizes in his brief introduction to the book, “Poets against the War”:

When I was invited to a White House symposium on poetry by Laura Bush, I asked a few fellow poet-friends to send me poems speaking ‘for the conscience of our country,’ in opposition to George Bush’s plans for ‘shock and awe,’ an attack on Baghdad that would result in about 3000 missiles hitting the city in the first two days of war. How could I have known I had 11,000 friends? Never before in recorded history have so many poets spoken in a single chorus (p. xvii).

“Poets against the War” speaks to the atrocities of war, to the use of force, and to the loss of legitimacy. Short’s “Statement of Conscience and American Light” (2003, p.212-214) is instructive here:

I watch the distant explosions  
The bursting bombs struck matches  
in the night, brief flares  
beyond the bedroom window. Who’s there?  
My mother said it wasn’t anything—a practice  
Bombing on the Bravo Range,  
Just think of fireworks  
On the 4<sup>th</sup> of July.

Short reminds us all too well of how a society and many of its leaders can normalize violence, and not only make it an element of daily life, but turn it into something that reflects what some people consider an expression of its greatest traditions. “The 4<sup>th</sup> of July” may remind many people of something sacred and glorious. But the poem, like many that constitute this volume in which poets speak against a war that for many people seemed so ignoble in purpose and aims, reminds others of what is humane or inhumane, what is right and wrong. As Hamill (2003) underscores, poetry may very well remind us of life’s purpose, and in a sublime way capture that which violates life itself (e.g., violence).

Even a single poet may serve as a society’s most potent witness. A poem can bring values into focus, and amplify paradoxes and contradictions in what a society deems acceptable or even cherishes. While many people go about daily life, confronting challenges that very well may wear

them down, those who take time to hear the poet's voice can come to better understand what is out of sight, outside direct consciousness, or that which society itself comes to take for granted. Poetry eloquently expresses what is important to people and conveys how they feel about it while amplifying that which otherwise can be easily ignored.

Kaminsky's (1984) volume of poetry documenting a lament for Hiroshima is instructive here. The poet himself serves as surrogate witness and assembled in 1984, almost four decades after the fact, a collection of poetry specifically documenting a horrific event of one people's cruelty to another. But his poetry is unique since he bases it on – or, better yet, grounds it in – the eye witness accounts of survivors of the bombing, ordinary people, or common people for whom he gives full voice in a sequence of poems. Each entry captures a first person account as we see in verse 6 of the poem Kaminsky entitles "A White Blouse" (1984):

Black smoke rising  
here and there  
and Nakahiro-cho where my parents lived  
already in flames—  
apologizing in my heart  
I turned away from their home  
to seek shelter.

Kaminsky's poetry is a blunt instrument – it pounds at the reader hoping to communicate something indelible. In reading each poem one cannot escape reflection about what cruel acts people can commit against another. In this sense, poetry is reflexive for the reader. Each poem and the collection as a whole may change serious readers for whom Hiroshima has come to represent an icon of cruelty, perhaps institutional cruelty.

The verse the authors selected from "A White Blouse" reminds us of the aftermath – the self-incrimination, shame, guilt and helplessness that can erode the self of the witness. That poetry captures such memories in a compelling way reminds us of its potency. Poetry is memory. It



memorializes for the author and for readers events in graphic and disturbing ways. It encodes that which can be too easily forgotten or overlooked. The act of reading induces reflection and, in turn, the reflection changes us, perhaps in ways we do not readily notice at first, but nevertheless are emergent. A new structure of understanding can emerge – one full of understanding and enlightenment, the essence of reflexivity. A poem, therefore, can be evocative. It can literally awaken a new perspective, likely one in which emotion drives knowing.

Investigators who subscribe to the tenets of Action Research and who practice its methods can readily understand how poetry and reflexivity connect for Kaminsky's poetry is a form of action learning. Born in 1943, how could Kaminsky, the poet author, actually come to understand Hiroshima's after-effects and its toll on the human spirit? Although born amidst a world war, he taps into first person accounts of a monumental and massively destructive event, one without precedence in the history of humankind. Rather than a dispassionate or detached reporting of such an event (often times described as an objective account), the poet engages himself through the voices of its survivors. So, where is the rigor here? Where is the factual basis?

Perhaps the use of poetry in Action Research serves a purpose quite different from the aim of more objectivist social research. Poets speak in a different language, a language mainstream social scientists could discount given its inventiveness, interpretative quality, tenor and its use of image and metaphor. Kaminsky's work and the experiences of his witnesses align with the poets who produced Hamill's (2003) volume, "Poets against the War". They are relatives of sorts, closely connected in the manner in which they relate what can be easily isolated in the minds of common citizens and their leaders. Within these pages are reminders of the consequences of our actions, as individuals, as a society, and a civilization.

Poets can remind us of the limits of our institutions, and how institutions themselves can sometimes avert justice. Writing in his preface to the Vintage Books 2004 printing of “Let America Be America Again,” by Langston Hughes, Senator John Kerry offers a poignant perspective on institutional injustice that African American people have experienced historically and even now:

There is an old African American folk saying, “When America sneezes, blacks catch pneumonia.” The American economy caught in the grips of the Great Depression in the 1930s, was on life support, so you can imagine what that meant for blacks... In the depths of the Depression when one third of all workers were unemployed, more than 50 percent of African Americans found themselves down on their luck. And to make matters worse, many whites took their economic frustrations out on blacks, blaming them for the lack of jobs and available capital (2004, p. vii).

Senator Kerry places the work of Langston Hughes in a contemporary context and reminds us of how the poet serves as social critic instilling in those people who are receptive a mindfulness of how things work in practice: challenging cultural and social standards, making light of cherished ideals, and showing graphically the limits of our own idealism thereby illuminating realities people – particularly those who possess privilege or hold power--would wish otherwise to overlook. Langston Hughes (2004) is a potent bard:

O, let my land be a land where Liberty  
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,  
But opportunity is real, and life is free,  
Equality is in the air we breathe.  
(There’s never been equality for me, Nor freedom in this ‘homeland of  
the free.’)  
*Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark? And who are you that  
draws your veil across the stars?*  
I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,  
I am the Negro bearing slavery’s scars.  
I am the red man driven from the land,  
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek—  
And finding only the same old stupid plan  
Of dog eat dog, of might crush the weak.

Where does such verse take an Action Researcher intellectually, emotionally, and ethically? How does poetry facilitate interpretation and the subsequent formation of knowledge? If we begin with the idea of reflection, we can see how Kaminsky's approach to witnessing informs how we feel, think, and come to conceive of ethical action. Kaminsky's collection of poems based on the experience of first hand witnesses, can be contrasted with Hamill's collection of poets who chose dissent rather than affirmation or celebration, and Hughes's criticism of America and its institutions illustrate the power of poetry not only as interpretation but as a tool capable of producing primary knowledge. Reflection in this sense drives reflexivity - a deep reflection and consideration of "what is" producing inward action that can enhance development of self as a potent actor. Poets who follow this path produce poetry that offers counter-narrative to those social arrangements, perspectives, and structures that may justify numerous social ills.

Treating poetry as an element of the arts and humanities reveals its importance to the human experience. Poetry possesses a narrative quality that enhances its delivery. One of its greatest features is its ability to fill a story with rich imagery, imbuing a narrative with complexity, resonance, and meaning. If told by an outsider, one who otherwise does not command prestige in the greater society, that is, one who is marginal, a story in poetic form can create meaning that can challenge prevailing assumptions about what is acceptable, true, or good in a given situation. Such imagery, richness, and complexity can subsequently induce reflection and arouse people emotionally. Emotional arousal yields a form of knowledge that is substantially different from that which is gained through the consideration of more dispassionate analytic content. Emotion can color, motivate, instil perspective, and catalyze attitude.

For someone seeking to understand a situation, particularly one that they may find foreign or not of their direct or common experience, tapping into emotion and its arousal can open new ways of understanding. And, perhaps through such understanding it can be said that, "I" can identify with "the other," one whom "I" may find quite different from myself. The poetry of "the other" may teach individuals something new and engage them intellectually and emotionally. Poetry may engage a person in ways in which they have not been engaged before. And, consistent with the Greek notion of theory, poetry may help individuals begin to consider a reality that resides outside of their immediate line of vision, bringing into their awareness images and understanding that have never before entered their consciousness.

It is in this context that we offer insight into Dona's movement through homelessness as the homeless poet.

### **Methodological note: Leaving Homelessness Intervention Research Project**

Dona was a participant in a project founded by the two academic authors of this paper. Founded in 2000 and closing in 2010, the Leaving Homelessness Intervention Research Project (LHIRP) initially began as an Action Research project on the social issue of homelessness among older African American women and later evolved into a Participatory Action Research project when formerly homeless women became involved in all aspects of the project including research design, data collection and analysis, community education, and governance. Over the project lifespan some 530 women participated in at least one of LHIRP's subprojects.

Dona, along with seven of her peers, each of whom represented a distinctive pathway into homelessness became a member of the LHIRP steering council and used their expertise to support intervention design, particularly the

development and testing of support groups, advocacy, and a community education exhibit. Dona never shied away from telling her story and in her role as a community educator she oriented an array of people and groups (e.g., physicians, physician assistants, nurses, social workers, students in higher education, and political and corporate leaders) to the realities of homelessness among older African American women.

Although a need existed to gain insight into the problems and circumstances that precipitated older minority women like Dona's descent into homelessness and struggles to overcome it, this objective was not best accomplished through methods like survey research. Through LHIRP's "Telling My Story" subproject (Washington & Moxley, 2008) Dona worked with the two academic authors to document her journey into, through and out of homelessness. In addition, she used a number of materials to document her homelessness (e.g., through her own photovoice essay, original poetry and interpretative writing). These materials help people to understand Dona's homeless experience and how it transformed her concept of self.

Dona also contributed to the development of a conceptual portrait of her homeless experience undertaken for LHIRP's community exhibit entitled "On the Edge of Recovery." Such products of LHIRP's Participatory Action Research helped Dona to elaborate her experience and helped the two academic authors and others, like community leaders, gain valuable insight into homelessness among older African American women.

The materials incorporated below have been taken from LHIRP's primary documents, particularly from Dona's Telling My Story conversation, a transcript incorporating Dona's reconstruction of her journey through homelessness. These materials also include her poetry, which she authored while homeless, and the notes she wrote to help the two academic authors better understand the conditions in which

she penned each poem, and appreciate the meaning she sought to communicate through each one.

### **The praxis of collaboration**

The praxis of the collaborative research undertaken by the team of authors began early when Olivia, an African American woman, and an academic-initiated joint work with David, a Caucasian man who, like his colleague Olivia, came from a working class background. Both Olivia and David pursued a research agenda involving the formation of resilience among people who faced considerable vulnerability, so it was natural for both of them to blend their approaches across themes of spirituality, social support, strengths, and hardiness. For Olivia and David what was to emerge as positive psychology served as a natural framework within which to come to understand something as serious as homelessness, and the focus on minority groups was consistent with their previous Action Research.

It was Olivia who framed the Leaving Homelessness Intervention Research and imbued it with concepts of vulnerability and resilience inherent in the African American experience. David brought over two decades of research experience in working directly with homeless people, but Olivia's perspective vastly informed and expanded his own. David was well beyond tenure in his academic career, and Olivia was beyond the mid-point in her pursuit of this cherished institutional recognition. These career realities entered into the institutional aspects of the research in important ways. And those aspects influenced their initial motivation but did not determine it. Other aims were important.

Olivia and David sought to incorporate into LHIRP three aims, one of which was self-serving: the inclusion of a strong research agenda consistent with the academic requirements of an urban research institution. Balancing this research agenda were the two other aims – offering those

women who served as research participants to change their roles and engage in participatory governance of LHIRP, and offering participants innovative forms of support to facilitate their emergence from homelessness. An important source of this support would prove to be “Telling My Story”, the narrative subproject in which eight women illuminated in rich detail their journeys into, through and out of homelessness.

### **Dona’s leadership**

Dona was the first participant in the Telling My Story subproject. Her story was one of the most dramatic of the participants, and she helped Olivia and David to design the questions and arrange their sequence. Her feedback during the course of the conversation process improved its focus, and she added ways of better understanding the causes and consequences of homelessness. As part of her characterization of her own life course, Dona identified her poetry as an important asset she possessed, which she placed in the context of her development as an artist and her emergence as an advocate. Indeed, it was Dona who showed David and Olivia the importance of poetry as a way of communicating and coping with the exigencies of homelessness.

Dona’s story and her involvement as a colleague greatly moved the academic authors. They literally expanded their possibilities of inquiry as they came to know Dona as a vital and resilient person. Dona’s principal contribution within LHIRP centered in the important role she played in the expansion of methodologies of inquiry and strategies of offering support to participants. It was Dona who expanded the humanistic base of the research while she indicated the benefits of including within the action framework ways of understanding the human experience of homelessness. Thus, she was pivotal in making her colleagues aware of the contributions of storytelling through the arts, literary tools,

and the humanities. That the project at this time shifted into a more participatory framework was not an accident. Dona's influence on this shift was considerable. Over the subsequent five years, LHIRP expanded its collaborative focus and gained considerable competencies in the facilitation of team-based research with the person who was homelessness. It was such a person who could offer considerable expertise in determining questions, content of tools, the application of research methods, and the design of supportive structures.

### **Narrative and praxis**

The inclusion of narrative and storytelling proved to be a strategic decision. Participants treated each woman's narrative with considerable respect and telling a story was welcomed as an important way of understanding the lived experience of homelessness. It was the narrative method that accelerated trust – participants, including the researchers, came to be well understood through their stories and the issues, challenges, breakthroughs and victories those stories could communicate offered graphic ways of respecting the homeless experience. The narrative structure was a critical source of information – it captured the dynamics of homelessness as a social issue and proved to everyone involved in LHIRP that indeed homelessness was rooted in a woman's experience of oppression.

Here the three authors can assert an ethical praxis grounded in the insight one can gain into self and other through listening and witnessing what transpires in a narrative. For the authors, narrative anticipates drama, and drama arouses or even intensifies feelings. As academics, Olivia and David were not necessarily ready for such intensification. The method itself moved them from a stance one could characterize as objective, to one characterized as engaged. Such a stance is "good" because to understand the hardship a diminished status creates for a person one must witness it as it unfolds and is presented by someone who has direct



experience with the issue. Positioning oneself in this regard creates risk. The witness herself is vulnerable.

And, as a result of their shift in location, both Olivia and David experienced considerable vulnerability. After each engagement with a storyteller who shared her hardships, Olivia and David had to simply discharge the tension they experienced, one that escalated over the course of a three-hour conversation. What follows is a telling aspect of such vulnerability told from David's perspective:

Listening attentively for so long to Dona's pain I personally feel like I will succumb to the bitterness of homelessness. I see Olivia's own vulnerability in the countenance of her expression as I see Dona's words weigh heavy on my dear colleague's fortitude. How can we resist such pain? We can't. We can't resist. We succumb as we move closer to the meaning of homelessness. I have so much respect for Dona. She is a survivor and a vital one who can pass on to us rather tough individuals enough content that makes us feel like we cannot come to take in any more. I am as much homeless as Dona. I must respect that I too can one day become homeless. But can I survive homelessness with as much virtue in tact as Dona? I wonder.

David returns to his scribbled notes to highlight his own action learning. Dona possesses considerable power in changing the perspective of the so-called objective observer:

What can I learn from Dona? Today I have reached saturation. No more. I can't take anymore of this pain. But Olivia and I face numerous other conversations with women who are very much like Dona - tough, soft, vulnerable, transcendent. Wise from their years and from their hardship. Tough in their preparation for life by loved ones who knew what fortitude oppression demands of someone who is on the margins.

And then insight into method emerges from David's experience:

How does one come to best understand virtue in the face of oppression when one does not want to simply dismiss the seriousness of this issue? How does one enter a paradox—the coexistence of vulnerability and strength, the coexistence of fragility and resilience? Dona, the humanist knows such a paradox since she has lived it and her poetry captures it in rich insight. Her wisdom resonates—“Look at it through the eyes of someone who has been there. Appreciate the issue and its magnitude. Understand how it feeds off of vulnerability. Understand how someone fights back with resilience while facing a monster.” This is how praxis unfolds as two or more individuals

merge their understanding into a new form. This is the power of narrative whether it comes as story or poem.

### **Dona: The homeless poet**

For Dona, who is African American, homelessness was an abrupt departure from her life course. Too often lay people entertain inaccurate stereotypes of those who are homeless attributing their entry into this status as a product of mental illness or substance use. Dona's homelessness occurred early in 2002 when she was well into her 50s. The authors' research into the onset of homelessness among older African American women indicates too well that neither mental illness nor substance use are principal factors influencing their movement into this life threatening circumstance. Even so, there are numerous issues that cause (or interact to cause) homelessness among older African American women. They include divorce or a loss of spouse due to death, accidents that destroy homes, abrupt changes in income, the onset of poor health or the aggravation of an existing condition by stressful life events. Job losses, and changes in the economy, much like those that recently took place in the United States, jeopardize the lives of millions of people.

The investigators' research into homelessness among older African American women has revealed that this situation occurs quickly and has numerous negative consequences involving health and well-being. Frequently, after a lifetime of hard work involving the care of children, the support of elders, and multiple jobs that offer little in the way of benefits, older African American women are too often unequipped for retirement (Washington, 2005; Washington, Moxley & Taylor, 2009). Many of these situations replicate the circumstances that Dona faced when she also confronted domestic violence as something she was unwilling to accept. Consequently, she chose homelessness over abuse. Without recourse to family support or help from extended kin, health conditions limiting employment, and finding herself without

a salient cognitive map guiding her next steps, Dona took to the streets and sought shelter in the only place she had available – her automobile.

Dona moved through several stages of homelessness over the course of three years. Early on she spent evenings in her car while she sat during the day in a public park adjacent to the Detroit River. Then by accident, Dona discovered a homeless shelter, which became for her a healing place:

Well, I was, my car wasn't running, I was in Southwest Detroit, and I was just walking, and I walked up to the motel there on Boulevard and Ford Street, and I said well I'll just have to spend the night here, cause it was cold, and then I saw the (shelter) across the street, but I didn't know it was a shelter for women and children. I just walked in and asked "Do you know where there is a shelter for women and children?" And they said right here. So I spent the night there then I went back to my sister's and got my things.

And, it was the kind of support she needed at the time:

And I started thinking, Ok when I sat down at the (shelter) and they told me, bank all, everything you get. That you can eat free, if you need clothes we'll give you clothes, we'll work with you on finding a place, if you're disabled we have programs, subsidized housing; you stay here ninety days, bank everything that you get, and we will help you.

She then moved into transitional housing and finally with the assistance of a proactive social service program she found permanent and affordable housing. Today, Dona lives in her own apartment home with rent she can afford. She serves as a recovery support specialist for other women who are dealing with significant life challenges and she continues her development as a poet.

Dona possesses numerous psychological, intellectual, and emotional assets central to helping her survive homelessness, among them her innate capacity as a poet, her training in the arts and theatre, and her considerable capacity for coping with adversity she garnered from her parents and grandparents. Indeed, it was the voice of her grandmother that Dona heard clearly when she was finally in a hospitable shelter that strengthened her creative resolve to address her

own circumstances. Poetry, writing, and creative portrayal figure into Dona's story as important assets:

Uh, well, I'd done a part of it, and I finished a screen play a couple of years ago, and it's out there floating around somewhere. My grandmother lived an interesting life, she was a missionary and a minister, and she had a lot of wonderful experiences. And it came to me, you know, in a dream. She said, "You write my story, you'll prosper." And I said, oh Ok.

Dona continued to produce poetry as she moved through the several stages of homelessness so she could come to sustain her sense of self and maintain a strong faith in moving forward.

Uh Huh, cause I've been writing short stories and poems for ages. And so, that took a lot of myself, thinking about myself, you know, feeling sorry for myself, because my grandmother was such a strong person, and she instilled in us, you know, if you have a will, God will make a way.

Faith is something tangible and personal for Dona, something she embraced as a young girl with a supportive family, a resource she could draw on at any time:

Uh, it is the source of strength; knowing that you have a redemptive source who is omnipresent and you can draw on this at any time. You know, way in the midnight hour, early in the morning, while washing clothes, cooking, you can draw on this. And, it has been a comfort, encouragement, because I know at any time I can draw off this.

With the voice of the poet firmly ensconced in her spirit and stimulated by memories of her very strong grandmother, Dona's own creative work ensued and her poetry both flowed and flowered. For Dona, poetry connected her to the tradition of strong women who helped her "come along" as a young person. For Dona poetry was about rallying her considerable resilience in the face of what could be an overwhelming threat to her mental and physical health. Dona's poetry strengthened her connection with her faith and spirituality, family traditions, beloved individuals, resilience and active coping.

## Dona as witness

Early on Dona described how she experienced the onset of homelessness using vivid language and penetrating image and metaphor. The following poem, Dona entitled "A Homeless Feeling," (undated) captured her sense of how homelessness felt at its onset. In her interpretive notes she describes homelessness writing "to me it was like walking down the street and a sudden dip in the sidewalk caused me to (lose) my footing and I fell, but couldn't find bottom." Her poetic interpretation of the homeless experience underscores her profound sense of disequilibrium:

There was a flash,  
A blast,  
A clap of thunder,  
A great wind  
A spin  
Swirling me under,  
and there I was falling, screaming calling out for help,  
A small yelp  
into the universe.  
I was alone  
No phone  
No home,  
nothing to call my own,  
Just falling and calling out for help.  
Surely there must be a bottom.  
What if I should hit the bottom, and nobody could hear my cry?  
I'll perish, I'll die.  
Please God don't let me die at the bottom of nonexistence.  
I must climb up and let someone know I was here.

Witnessing her own homelessness, and that of other women, moved Dona emotionally and spiritually to say "I believed that I was going to get my life back." Spirituality played a significant role in helping Dona sustain herself and in maintaining her momentum to move out of the ranks of the homeless. Her spirituality combined with other resources stand out in the poem that Dona entitles "Thank You Lord" (undated):

Thank you Lord for watching over me in the most darkest days of my life,  
and protecting me when I have been in the most dangerous and vulnerable places.  
Thank you Lord for sheltering me from the strongest winds in the coldest nights  
and rainy days.  
Thank you Lord for feeding me when I had no way nor means to feed myself.  
Thank you Lord for comforting me when my heart was breaking and tears were  
burning My face like melting wax flowing down the side of a candle.  
Thank you Lord for being there for me and with me when those who I thought were  
friends turned on me and family turned out not to be friends and treated me  
worse than a Stranger.  
Thank you Lord for loving me when I felt no one cared and it was hard to love myself,  
because I blame myself for all that had happened to me,  
and you forgave me so that I could forgive myself, and love myself,  
and love you and myself at the same time.  
Thank You!

Ultimately, for Dona, and for many people who find themselves homeless, faith and hope are important sustaining factors in their efforts to move out of harm's way. For Dona, "being homeless put me in touch with nature, people and God." In the following poem entitled "Ode to a Tree" (undated) she captures the essence of her hopes and dreams and communicates her own resilience:

This old tree has weathered a many storm, and stood the test of time.  
It has out lived a thousand bushes, and twice that many vines.  
It stood up in wind, rain, snow, parching sun, and laced with ice,  
While her roots dug deeper, strengthening the trunk not to give at any price.  
Buds to leaves green, to brown, yellow red and gold,  
From a seeding in an untamed forest, to acres, plots, lots, bought and sold.  
A haven for squirrels in holes, bees in hives, and birds homesteading in nest.  
This stately old tree holds these creatures tightly to her breast.  
I watched her wave her branches swaying and dancing with the breeze,  
How majestic and graceful her dance, her master and creator well pleased,

for when He created and formed all things, He pronounced them good and very good.

I now have a greater appreciation for all things made of wood.

And, like many other poets, including those steeped in the traditions of social criticism, and illuminating the dynamics of an uncaring society, Dona offers in her poem “Words from a Bag Lady” (undated) her own indictment, one which reflects the idea that homelessness exists because of a failed society:

You ask me about my future when my past has been so bleak.  
My existence is from day to day.  
There may not be a next week.  
You preach to me about prosperity  
and how to become a success.  
“Go get a job,” You say.  
I don’t even own a dress.  
I’m not making excuses about my situation or my plight.  
Right now my main concern is where will I sleep tonight.  
I did eat today after three days of doing without.  
Now, I feel sick as the food fill the hollow spaces in my gut  
and my feet swell from gout.  
May be I wouldn’t get sick so often after I eat  
if I had enough teeth to chew my food,  
and may be if I slowed down eating,  
but it just tasted so good.  
“It’s been a good day,” I think as the sun goes down.  
I’ll prepare a pallet behind this dumpster of the police station.  
It’s the safest place in town.  
Oh, don’t worry about me as I lie down to sleep,  
for I always say my prayers, and if I die before I awake...  
my soul is His to keep.

### **Conclusion: The reflexivity and praxis of poetry**

If one assigns importance to poetry as a form of witnessing, and to the poet as advocate, this form of artistic communication takes on added meaning when a serious social issue moves someone to capture their experience in verse. Perhaps we can consider Dona to be an advocate poet in which she educates her readers about the realities of homelessness that for her was:

A blast,

A clap of thunder,  
A great wind  
A spin  
Swirling me under.

Her poems taken together are testimonies to the causes and consequences of this most unnatural situation. Readers learn firsthand that homelessness is not natural and that housing is not an inherent right of any citizen albeit when given its importance to well being it should be a fundamental guarantee of citizenship. The car, the park, the street, and, the shelter are the last resort of many people who are without the means to secure and maintain a home. So Dona shows first hand in the poem “Words from a Bag Lady” that survival is the primary concern of a homeless person: “I’m not making excuses about my situation or my plight. Right now my main concern is, where will I sleep tonight.”

These words can only follow from a first person experience. Whereas Kaminsky’s powerful volume emerges from his empathic engagement of informants who survived the horrific event of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, Dona has been at the epicentre of an American tragedy. This tragedy took form in the gentrification of housing in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and since that time it has been an integral if not defining part of the American experience. Dona’s advocacy reveals the systemic features of homelessness – it is now built into the very fabric of the social system and is such a tenacious social issue that it does not show evidence of disappearing any time soon.

Dona’s poems serve as a vehicle for gaining humanistic insight into homelessness. Dona’s language is not the verse of science. Nor is it esoteric. It is rich and it enables her to express her thoughts and feelings directly. Her lyrics also are both emotionally and intellectually challenging. This poet’s work demonstrates both personal and human elements. Readers come into contact with Dona’s emotions, her sadness and anger. Through her poetry readers are put



in touch with the heroic Dona as the many virtues she employed to cope with homelessness emulate those of a relentless warrior. Readers also come into contact with Dona's vulnerabilities. The fact that she can count on neither people nor institutions to help her navigate this life-threatening situation, illuminates severe deficits in how communities can and should respond.

As readers listen carefully to Dona's story as an integral element of her poetry we become witnesses to this woman's plight and efficacy in the face of overwhelming odds. Her criticism of failed social arrangements that bring about this most negative of circumstances reminds us of the personal toll that homelessness exacts from people who lose their housing. In this manner, Dona is both the advocate and humanist. Through her poetry she reminds her readers of their own humanity, vulnerabilities, and strengths and how these assets and characteristics can dissipate in the face of overwhelming deprivation, trauma, and exposure. Through her poetry Dona also reminds us of our fellow travellers who may not share such necessities as shelter, food, and a job.

Dona positions her readers to engage in their own reflexivity, which can produce insight into the potentially homeless self. Readers are compelled to ask: "How would I survive if I were to become homeless?" "What means would I call upon?" "What vulnerabilities would homelessness accentuate in me?" "What strengths would emerge in the face of such a trauma to the human spirit?" "How would homelessness shape me?" "How would I navigate such an experience and emerge whole again?"

Such questions are powerful in their capacity to instil insight. A reader's consideration of such questions can bring them closer to the truth about homelessness and help them better understand what some individuals would prematurely and erroneously explain as a lapse in human motivation, morality, or competence. By inducing such reflection and the emergence of such reflexivity, Dona again demonstrates

her powers as an advocate and humanist. Serious consideration of her poetry invokes meaningful questions, those that can shake the very foundations of what makes each of us a human being.

But let us add one more consideration of Dona in addition to the authors' characterization of her as both advocate poet and humanist.

Her work shapes a form of praxis – it facilitates the formation of a theory of homelessness from one who experienced and survived it, which informs how a community can better address this serious issue. Dona's theory possesses multiple levels – a personal one, a case level, and even a grand level. She offers us insight into her own situation – which can provide a template useful in explaining why and how women in older age can plunge literally into homelessness. Dona did not expect to become homeless – but the circumstances she faced were neither accidental nor idiosyncratic. They are more systemic which helps us better understand how Dona's life reflects the same social dynamics that affect many women who face deprivation. Dona's life also stands as a case example for a whole class of older women who face this kind of exigency with its associated negative consequences and shows how one person's life can embody the scope of an entire social issue.

For the humanist, a single case can reflect an entire class, or a whole situation. As in Dona's case the story of one person can reveal the stories of many and offer yet another way of appreciating the praxis inherent in Dona's story as she expresses it in the many poems that she authors about her lived experience of homelessness. So, how does homelessness occur among older women? What are its consequences?

Armed with each of Dona's poems and their own interpretations readers can come away with a more coherent

explanation of the social dynamics influencing homelessness. Dona's poetry is not only illuminative but revelatory – it dramatically exposes the nature of homelessness. A grand theory linking helping and homelessness among older minority women can emerge here. It suggests numerous avenues of assistance starting with a critical consideration of how helpers communicate respect, foster dignity, and respond empathically to women who find themselves homeless. As helping persons listen to each woman's story they need to be mindful that such stories possess a grander narrative of deprivation, injustice, and vulnerability. The women's stories also reveal the need for offers of hospitality and flexible and meaningful support, particularly for helping them leave homelessness. Dona's story reveals much about infrastructure and the need for places of refuge and recovery, those that assemble all of the elements a person requires to improve their well-being. Her poetry narrative also suggests aspects of prevention – ensuring that vulnerable women obtain those supports that can eliminate the onset of homelessness.

The role of praxis in the lives of older homeless minority women becomes clearer when the welding together of insight into homelessness and action to resolve it is explored. Dona's poetry heightens our understanding of both of these elements offering a way to better understand how an older minority woman enters homelessness (a theory) and the action helpers can undertake to facilitate a person's movement out of this situation (practice).

Dona's poems tell us in graphic ways about the wilderness in which homelessness takes place. Homelessness takes place literally and figuratively in a wilderness. On a literal level Dona took refuge in the wilderness of an urban park, adjacent to a river, but she helps us understand this wilderness figuratively through metaphor and image evident in her poem that she entitles "The River of Tears" (undated):

On the bank under the tree of life I've knelt  
 by The River Of Tears  
 where all the pain and sorrow of the world is felt.  
 This is where my ancestors died,  
 and this is where my grandma cried  
 out to God to save the souls of the unsaved,  
 and free the minds of the enslaved.  
 This is where Blues Songs are written,  
 and this is where broken hearts are hidden  
 from now forgotten lovers  
 and the hardest of forgiven others.  
 This is where you come to wail and morn  
 when your heart is broken and your soul is torn.  
 This is where the widows come when their husbands die,  
 and strong men secretly sneak off from the world to cry  
 about things they can't openly express  
 like fear, anger, and stress.  
 This is where parents come  
 when their off springs are going wrong,  
 and the children visit here when they feel they don't belong  
 in a mean and hateful world  
 with the meanest of all boys and girls.  
 This is where kings and presidents come in the time of war  
 to ask God why and what are they fighting for,  
 and those condemned to die go  
 after they've had their last meal on death row.  
 This Old Man River made up of tears  
 of human beings from a million years  
 will never cease to flow  
 as long as we continue to go  
 there to cry and sob,  
 for so many by The River of Tears have found God.

Dona's power to educate, advocate, and instil insight is one of the benefits that poetry offers Action Researchers. She helps readers to both understand and feel how she felt as she struggled to overcome homelessness and its serious consequences. Her poetry communicates knowledge, and by opening up meaningful and vital issues for those who have the courage to confront and consider her powerful words, her poetry illuminates what should not remain in the shadows. Dona's poetry can transform its readers because the homeless wilderness abates as more people become receptive to how her words and phrases penetrate their

being. Through Dona's poetry many readers are compelled to recognize the homeless self with greater clarity and insight while some may be moved to provide meaningful support to women who struggle to leave homelessness. In this way the knowledge Dona's poetry embodies can move us to action.

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# **A Collaborative Inquiry: How do we, individually and collectively, integrate research and practice to improve the wellbeing of children? Joan Walton**

Traditional forms of research have not adequately provided us with the knowledge we need to improve children's wellbeing (UNICEF 2007). Boyer (1990) proposed that universities should not just value scholarship in the form of research but should include teaching and learning, application to practice, and an integration of different disciplines. Schön (1995) suggests the new scholarship requires a new epistemology, which should emerge from Action Research.

Developing the new epistemology I initiated a collaborative inquiry with early years practitioners, looking at how to improve the wellbeing of children. They are encouraged to develop their own living theories (Whitehead, 1989) through an exploration of what really matters to them, and how they can support each other in developing a meaningful response to their individual and collective concerns. Outcomes from the inquiry include the transformational impact practitioners experience as a consequence of listening and sharing with others in the collaborative learning process.



## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide an account of a collaborative inquiry undertaken by early years practitioners in day nursery settings. They were inquiring into the question: “How do we, individually and collaboratively, integrate research and practice to improve the wellbeing of children?” The project was a partnership between the Centre for the Child and Family (CfCF) at Liverpool Hope University and a city council, with myself as main facilitator.

The project was initiated after the city council approached the university, stating that they spent a major proportion of their budget on staff training programmes and attendance at conferences, yet could see no improvement in practice within children’s services as a consequence. They wondered if there were a more effective means of supporting the learning of staff.

There were two main strands influencing the development of this project. The first was my contention that we have not, locally or globally, learned how to ensure the wellbeing of all children, despite large amounts of research undertaken. I use the UK as a case study to justify this view, but I think the argument would have relevance to a greater or lesser extent in any country. I use the evidence provided to support the view that we need to place greater emphasis on research methods that aim to improve the world, not just explain or interpret it.

The second influence was the experience of my own professional practice in and with children’s services, identifying key factors that hinder the ability of professionals and organisations to radically improve the lives of children and young people. Again I consider this issue can only be properly addressed through a radical transformation of the relationship between research and practice.

The Centre for the Child and Family was established explicitly to create a more dynamic relationship between

research and practice, such that research was grounded in the experience of practitioners, and its findings disseminated in ways that were practically useful for practitioners and their managers. New ideas of scholarship were being explored in this process, based on Boyer's (1990) view that scholarship in universities should include not just research, but also application to practice, teaching and learning, and integration across disciplines. Donald Schön (1995) stated that the new scholarship requires a new epistemology, which should take the form of Action Research.

The collaborative inquiry followed a cyclical process of action and reflection, where all participants were co-researchers and co-inquirers (Heron, 1985, 1996). At the same time, individuals identified and pursued their own specific inquiry question concerning how they would improve their practice with and for children, based on a living theory approach to Action Research (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). I too was exploring the question as to how I could improve my practice as facilitator of this process, based on my values of respect and mutual empowerment within a participatory worldview.

This paper was written as a review of the first seven months of the inquiry. Initially progress was slow; but as practitioners learned to understand the significance of their contribution to improve the wellbeing of children, and became more aware of the factors that both helped and hindered their ability to do so, their motivation and enthusiasm for their work was greatly enhanced. Evidence of improvement was presented to the funding groups, who have now commissioned the Centre to develop the project across a wider range of children's services.

## **Setting the context**

*The wellbeing of children and young people*

The concept of 'wellbeing' is one that has been extensively used amongst policy makers, practitioners and academics in

both the UK and internationally. The 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises the inherent dignity and equal rights of all members of society, including children; and a UNICEF report states:

The true measure of a nation's standing is how well it attends to its children – their health and safety, their material security, their education and socialisation, and their sense of being loved, valued, and included in the families and societies into which they are born (UNICEF 2007, p. 4).

Children's wellbeing has been defined and interpreted in many ways (UNICEF 2007, Bradshaw, et al, 2009). Most research aims to identify measurable criteria that describe the current state of affairs, and allow the situations of children to be monitored as accurately as possible. Studies have used different indicators, and different ways of measuring those indicators (Ben-Arieh, 2010).

However this focus on finding increasingly precise ways to better understand and evaluate children's wellbeing does not appear to have succeeded in contributing to an improvement. From a UK point of view, the UNICEF report (2007) on childhood in rich countries ranks the UK 21<sup>st</sup> out of 21 countries on an overall measure of child wellbeing. A further piece of comparative research by the same authors on children's wellbeing in the European Union shows that in a comparison of 25 European states, the UK ranks 21<sup>st</sup>, above only the Slovak Republic, Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania (Hoelscher & Richardson, 2007).

There is a gap, then, in knowledge gained to describe or explain an existing situation, and knowledge gained to improve that situation. In the world of academic research, the emphasis has been on the former rather than the latter.

The question I then asked myself was: why in our society is there so much emphasis on research that generates information which aims to tell us how things are, rather than create knowledge that will help us make things better?

Should we not place greater emphasis on researching how we improve situations?

For example, one of the six dimensions in the UNICEF report is young people's peer and family relationships. The indicators used in this dimension were drawn from data on family structures, plus children's own answers to survey questions. The indicators included, for example, the percentage of children living in single-parent families, and the percentage of children who report eating the main meal of the day with parents more than once a week.

The report in its conclusion states:

Taken together, the six dimensions of child well-being assessed in these pages represent a **significant step forward in measuring and comparing children's well-being across the countries of the OECD...** Many ...feel that it is time to attempt to re-gain a degree of **understanding, control and direction** over what is happening to our children in their most vital, vulnerable year (UNICEF 2007, p. 41, emphasis added).

The language used here reflects a society where people are seen as separate from each other; that in order to understand we need to be able to measure; and if we are to do something about the "corrosive social problems affecting the quality of life", we need to "regain a degree of ...control and direction" (suggesting that at some previous point in time we had that; an apparent assumption I would want to challenge).

The further assumption embedded in the report is that somehow, if we can only improve our forms of measurement, we will gain greater control and direction, enabling us to influence what happens to children in 'their most vital, vulnerable years'. However, the report gives no justification for this assumption; it does not spell out the nature of the relationship between being in possession of excellent and detailed information about children's wellbeing; and taking action that will improve their wellbeing.

It seems, in fact, that in the world of academic research, although we have very sophisticated methods for gathering quantitative data, and a wide range of methods for collecting the subjective views of people, we actually have not achieved much in relation to knowing what we can do to improve wellbeing. I would suggest that we have a long way to go to discover how to create knowledge across policy makers, academics and professionals that will help us learn how to demonstrably improve the social and economic wellbeing of people, including that of children.

The gap that exists between the gaining of new knowledge, and knowledge applied to find a solution to the problems being studied, is an inevitable consequence of emphasis given to the positivist and interpretist research methodologies that are traditionally prioritised in the academy. The aim of research within these paradigms is to describe or explain a situation, not to improve it. The intention may be to provide a knowledge base, which can be used to inform developments; but initiating and evaluating the developments are not in themselves seen to be a focus of the research. A separation is maintained between the researcher and that which is being researched, with the researcher not taking responsibility beyond explaining what is happening.

### **Learning from my own experience**

My own experience supports the view that research does not directly help us enhance the quality of children's lives. My early professional life was as a 'housemother' working with children in residential care. Entering into that role in my late teens, I was overwhelmed by the emotional pain and suffering those children were experiencing as a consequence of dysfunctional and often violent family backgrounds. I felt that I did not have the knowledge I needed to help them and went to university with the aim of learning what to do. At the end of three years I knew much about many things; but

what I learned from a number of different disciplines did not equip me to better help those young people. I experienced in a very direct way the dissonance between theoretical book knowledge and what was required to make a difference in people's lives.

My experience throughout my professional career reinforced for me the view that the answers I was looking for in relation to improving the wellbeing of children were not to be found in any academic discipline, nor in the belief systems of any religion or philosophical school of thought. Neither could answers be discovered using traditional scientific methods of investigation, where the researcher sought to adopt a value-free approach as an objective and impartial observer, using control groups to validate his findings. The knowledge I was seeking was to learn how to **enhance** the wellbeing of children, not just to understand what kind of lives they were living, or the factors that impeded them fulfilling their innate potential.

Knowledge concerning how the lives of children can be improved does not widely exist in the public domain. The response to the UNICEF (2007) report demonstrates this. If, on receiving the report, politicians or researchers had the knowledge required to resolve the problems, they would no doubt have done so. However, in 2010, UNICEF put out a tender to researchers, the aim of which was to discover why other countries appeared to be doing better than the UK, what exactly they were doing, and why the UK was at the bottom of the table. The emphasis in this project was to use a methodology that explained and understood; again there was no attempt to develop a methodology that discovered how to improve the situation.

And yet, I knew there were places where the wellbeing of children was improved. During my time as a practitioner, manager, educator and consultant in social work, education and health contexts I had observed many examples of

exceptional work with children and young people. To give specific examples:

I had witnessed the extreme behavioural and emotional problems exhibited by two young children as a consequence of living their early lives in an abusive family home.

Gradually these problems were resolved largely through the care of committed foster parents; and eventually the children moved on to be successfully adopted as happy balanced young people.

On another occasion, I had been involved in a community-based programme that had great success in engaging disaffected young people as a result of the patient and inspired leadership of talented youth workers. Indeed I had observed on many occasions in many places the positive impact of teachers, social workers, nursery staff and other professionals as they related to children on a daily basis in their work. So there was no question that good professional practice existed.

The problem was that the learning gained from these excellent examples of practice was not informing the world of research; nor was there any emphasis on identifying the sources of information or experience that were influencing the development of such practices. It seemed that a whole wealth of experience and learning was being used and generated on a daily basis in work undertaken with children and young people; but the impact of good work undertaken was isolated within the individual contexts in which it took place; and there was no means by which the learning gained was articulated and disseminated in ways that then informed policy making and research agendas.

As a consequence of this realisation over a long period of time, I decided that I wanted to engage in research that helped address my concern; in other words I wanted to inquire into “how to integrate research and practice across disciplines and professions in order to improve the

wellbeing of children". It was with this research question that I joined Liverpool Hope University and initiated the Centre for the Child and Family as a means of facilitating and supporting enquiries that provided responses to the question.

### **Implications for a university: The influence of Boyer and Schön**

Boyer (1990) engaged in a radical critique of the extent to which universities equated ideas of scholarship with research; and contended that scholarship should also include teaching, integration of knowledge across different disciplines, and application in practice. He strongly emphasised the view that higher education and research should serve the interests of the wider community. However, this should not be a one-way process.

The process we have in mind is far more dynamic. New intellectual understandings can arise out of the very act of application ...theory and practice vitally interact, and one renews the other. Such a view...is particularly needed in a world in which huge, almost intractable problems call for the skills and insights only the academy provide. As Oscar Handlin observed, our troubled planet "can no longer afford the luxury of pursuits confined to an ivory tower" (1990, p. 23).

It was with this idea that I responded to a city council's request to discover methods of learning that would result in improved practice leading to an enhancement in children's wellbeing. The frustration of the very committed early years consultant who approached me on behalf of the city council was evident. A considerable amount of the council's budget was being spent on attendance of practitioners on training programmes and conferences, but there was little if any consequent impact on practice. Could I work with children's services to address this situation? It was agreed that I facilitate a process with a group of early years practitioners and their managers to inquire into the question: "How do



we, individually and collectively, integrate research and practice to improve the wellbeing of children?"

Although Boyer supported the notion that a university should develop a mutually informing relationship between research, practice, teaching and the integration of knowledge; he did not suggest a method by which it could be achieved. Schön (1995) explored this issue in considerable depth, and proposed the new scholarship required a new epistemology, which could emerge from Action Research. He based his argument on the view that new knowledge which can be applied in practice would not be created from objective observation and analysis. Rather, in fact, it needs to arise from the practice itself: "the scholarship of application means the generation of knowledge for, and from, action" (1990, p. 31).

### **A living theory approach to Action Research**

'Living theory' is a form of Action Research in which individuals ask, research and respond to questions of the kind: 'how do I improve what I am doing'? (Whitehead, 1989, 2005b, Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). Action research is described by Reason and Bradbury as "an orientation to research that is aimed at improving participants' lives" (2001, p. xxi).

Kemmis makes a distinctive claim when he states that he considers the first concern of Action Researchers should be "*the contribution of their action to history, not so much to theory*" (2010, p. 425, italics in original). He suggests that Action Researchers are not only, or even necessarily, contributing to a theoretical body of knowledge, but rather are generating transformational actions, which lead to a "disposition to act wisely in uncertain practical situations" (2010, p. 422), with the aim of benefiting "the good of each person and the good of humankind" (2010, p. 425). Action research should be concerned with the flourishing of humanity rather than analysing, conceptualising and philosophising about it. The

latter has its place, but in Action Research these serve the former.

This connects with Reason and Bradbury's view when they say:

By bringing scholarship and praxis back together... our immodest aim is to change the relationship between knowledge and practice... as the academy seeks additions and alternatives to its heretofore 'ivory tower' positivist model of science, research and practice ... Action research is therefore an inherently value laden activity, usually practised by scholar-practitioners who care deeply about making a positive change in the world (2001, p. xxxiv).

A living theory approach to Action Research encourages the researcher to actively engage in an exploration of what they might 'contribute to history'. What gives living theory its distinctiveness is that it is explicitly grounded in the values that provide the foundation for how the researcher lives and works in the world; and recognises existing as a 'living contradiction' when there is a dissonance between the values they claim to hold, and how they actually behave. Living theory is, at its most fundamental, a person recognising this dissonance, and wanting to resolve it.

The process of creating a living theory involves the individual considering what really matters to them and how they want to make a difference in the world. It encourages them to inquire into the influences on their own learning, and how they influence the learning of others within the socio-cultural contexts in which they live and work (Whitehead, 2005a).

Whitehead (2005a, p.1) summarises creating a living theory as a process where the 'I' is central:

I experience a concern when my values are not being lived as fully as I think they could be.

I imagine what to do about this in an action plan.

I act and gather data with which to make a judgement on my effectiveness.

I evaluate my actions in relation to my values and understandings.

I modify my concerns, plans and actions in the light of my evaluations.

The idea that such theories are 'living' theories:

was further reinforced by the idea that the explanation for an individual's present practice would include an evaluation of the past practice and an intention to create something better in the future which the individual was committed to working towards (Whitehead, 2000, p. 97).

A living theory approach to research provides a sound basis for me in my aim to contribute to the generation of knowledge concerning how to improve the wellbeing of children.

### **Creating my living theory**

Although I did not name it as such, I can track back the origins of the development of my living theory, and the values that underpin it, to my early days as a 'houseparent' in the residential children's home. I was asking questions about how life could be meaningful when such extreme suffering of young children was possible. The inquiry process that evolved from this questioning led me to realise that I was not going to find a definitive and universal response to the experience of suffering; but I did find an answer that satisfied me in relation to the meaningfulness of life. I learned that I could experience it as meaningful if I were given the freedom and support to discover what my interests and abilities were, and the opportunity to live a life that allowed me to develop these interests and abilities.

I also realised that no-one was the same; that what was right for me was not necessarily right for others; everyone had unique interests, gifts and talents; and I wanted to help create a world where each person had the freedom and support that I sought for myself. The values underpinning this were **respect** for every human being and their right to create their own meaningful life; and **mutual empowerment** as a requirement if each person were to acquire the confidence and skills to assert this right whilst providing others with an equal opportunity to do the same.

It is in this sense that I perceive myself as a facilitator in many of the roles that I play; a person who creates an environment that encourages others to develop a confidence and value in themselves and is able to consider what they can do to live a richer and more meaningful life.

This way of living also informs and is informed by my ontological view of the world, which I experience as a 'participatory reality' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, Bateson, 1979, Skolimowski, 1994, Heron, 1996). The idea of a participatory reality challenges the 'subject-object' divide, which structures the basis of dualist positivist perceptions. Rather than reality being completely objective or completely subjective, a participatory worldview perceives the world as subjective-objective, where there is "intermarriage between the creative construing of the human mind and what is cosmically given" (Heron, 1996, p. 162).

A participatory view of reality supports the interconnection between aspects of the universe. It has major implications for the way we view ourselves, and others in relation to ourselves. It deeply challenges the power imbalances inherent within social structures that are established in contexts, which ascribe value to a person or thing according to its perceived status in a hierarchically structured universe. Within a participatory worldview, we do not discover a world just waiting to be known; but collaboratively we create a reality which is shaped by the nature and quality of our subjective-objective relationships.

In this respect, then, it fully supports my perception that we need to engage in research that is about improving the world not just explaining it; and that in so doing each person should be respected and empowered to live a life that is meaningful to them. It also provides a rationale for integrating living theory inquiries within a collaborative context.

## Collaborative inquiry

Engaging in inquiry-based forms of research and learning have been influenced by the writings of Dewey (1910), who considered that knowledge is derived from experience, and 'truth' is to be found in the consequences of actions, with there being no absolute notions of what truth might consist of. His ways of viewing the nature of knowledge have provided support for experiential methods based on a mutually informing relationship between theory and action.

Heron's (1985, 1996) creation of co-operative inquiry has been influential in the shaping of a paradigm of inquiry that values participation and democracy as integral to the research process. Co-operative inquiry is a methodology which:

...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 (Heron, 1996, p. 1).

Heron, like Dewey, maintained that however hard researchers might try, they were not able to get outside of their own human condition; they could only learn through their full embodiment of it. In developing co-operative inquiry as a research methodology, he proposed a specific set of techniques and processes. In my facilitation of a collaborative process of learning, I am not strictly adhering to Heron's approach, though I completely accept the participatory principles on which his methodology is based. In so doing, I am in accordance with Bray, et al, when they say:

Interpretations by a detached observer through interviews about the experience of others are less likely to convey that experience with the same richness and validity than interpretations arrived at through dialogue on shared lived experience. In the latter collaborative process, the meaning of experience is derived from the inside out, rather than being imposed on experience... There is a political dimension to Heron's thinking that maintains that people have rights to

participate in and express their own values in the design of an inquiry into their experience. Only when this condition holds can researchers ensure that their work empowers, rather than disempowers, participants (2005, p. 5).

Thus in creating a collaborative inquiry, my intention was to create a rigorous method of learning through experience, enabling the forming of responses to questions which were important to the individuals involved. In aiming to develop a relationship between the concerns of the individual and a collaborative process of learning, I was recognising and exploring Bateson's (2000) concept of an 'ecology of the mind' where he shows that ideas are not contained within the psychology of the individual, but can be organised into a system of 'minds', the boundaries of which are fluid and extend beyond the individual.

Guattari, in talking about the need for society to deal with contemporary challenges, contends that it will need to reconstruct itself. This will be achieved, not through centralised reform, but through an "expansion of alternative experiences centred around a respect for singularity" (2000, p. 59), undertaken with an awareness and reinvention of the social environment in which the individual is located.

The early years practitioners who were to be invited to be members of this inquiry were familiar with responding to the demands of an external bureaucracy; but did not see themselves either individually or collectively being able to affect the attitudes of those working within that bureaucracy. This project provided the opportunity to explore ways in which the singularity of individuals developed within a collaborative context could influence the wider socio-cultural context in which they were located.

### **Facilitating the creation of individual living theories within a collaborative inquiry**

Early years professionals from twelve settings were invited to participate in the collaborative inquiry. This would

involve attendance at a monthly group meeting. In between sessions, I would meet individuals as and when requested or required to support them in their inquiry.

During the initial session, I explained my view that research and policy making was not sufficiently informed by the experience and skills of practitioners; and that there was a gap between policies and practice, between good intentions and consequent outcomes. The purpose of the inquiry was to research what could be done to redress that situation.

In establishing the collaborative inquiry, I was developing my own living theory as a facilitator who would create a context in which the uniqueness of each participant would be respected, and where I would work to create an ethos of mutual empowerment, trusting that each person could access their own source of wisdom and knowledge within themselves, and should be encouraged to do so.

I communicated this view to the group, saying that it was my belief that most human beings wanted to make a difference in the world, but that because of a dominant culture that prioritised mechanistic ways of managing organisations which accorded less value to those at the bottom of the hierarchy than to those at the top, many people became dispirited and de-motivated.

I wanted to work with them 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 wellbeing of children. As they were the people working directly with children, they had a key role to play in creating the required knowledge.

However, there needed to be better communication; as Ledwith and Springett put it, a 'connected knowing':

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 (2010, p. 129-130).

Group members were introduced to the ideas of 'living theories'; and were invited to talk about how they came to be working where they were. As they shared their stories and listened to each other, it was clear that most people were passionate about their work; there was a strong sense of 'loving what they did'. By the end of the session there was a profound sense of connection and affirmation within the group. Already, Guattari's notion of a praxis arising from the power of recognising singularity within a collaborative ethos was being experienced.

In the meetings that followed, participants were invited to create their own living theories, to identify what their values were, and to write accounts that demonstrated how their values were being put into practice.

At each session those present would share their accounts, and explore issues arising from them. Initially these would focus on what the educational influences had been on their own learning; and for many it was experiences in childhood that had impacted on them. They had not realised the connection between those childhood experiences and the values that were important to them in the present. For example one participant wrote:

I came from a family with 5 children, my mother died when I was 11. My father was a great believer in children learning by your own mistakes, if you are not allowed to make them you will never learn. I believe my father knew each and every one of us - he always understood my needs. Maybe this is where my understanding comes from of the need for all children to feel understood and allowed to make mistakes and learn by them, but still feel safe and secure and loved.

As they became more confident in the process of articulating what was important to them, each person selected an area of their work that they wanted to specifically focus on as the basis of their contribution to the project. This has enabled



them to move on to how they might influence the learning of others. Group members are at the stage where they are creating Action Plans that will identify what they are going to achieve over the next few months. These include an issue that is concerning them, what they want to do about it, what information they need, where they can get that information, and how they will evaluate and provide evidence of their learning and progress.

There have been seven group meetings to date; the inquiry is still progressing. However already a rich resource of material has been created for those wanting to know exactly what motivates and influences the lives of professionals in early years settings. Practitioners are only now learning to understand that what they do is truly of value; and that their experience, and the learning they gain from their experience, has much to offer the worlds of research and policy development.

## **Interim report on the learning from the project**

### *Impact on practitioners*

A major learning that has emerged from the project is the realisation of the significance of the moment-by-moment relationship that practitioners create with the children; and that it is what they do 'in this present moment' that will make the difference. They have thus become more conscious that they need to be more aware of their thoughts, actions and feelings 'right here, right now', and should not get diverted from what is happening in this present relationship with the child by dwelling on past events or future planning. They have become conscious that the child may misinterpret their mood and behaviour if they are distracted. The impact of this realisation was evidenced clearly in the following sections from one person's account:

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. 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.

This incident signifies to me the completely normal things that occur in life and how children can interpret these. My mum 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?

On my way to work at 6.30 on a cold winter's morning, 8 months pregnant with my two year old daughter, my car broke down. I cried through frustration and tiredness, knowing I would have to carry my daughter back home to phone for help. This was no different from the potato incident, but who knows how my daughter may have interpreted my silence?

So I would like to explore further how our behaviour influences the behaviour of those around us. I would like to explore with practitioners their values and encourage them to also look at moments in their past which may affect their interaction with children. The idea that transforming yourself can help transform others is fascinating and setting aside the guilt I feel about nearly everything, I now know how understanding where I am coming from, can help me make better decisions in the future.

In this respect they have been helped by being introduced to the concept of 'mindfulness', which Jon Kabat-Zinn (2005) expresses as paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally. They realise from experience that this might be easy to say, but takes considerable practice to embed into their daily behaviour.

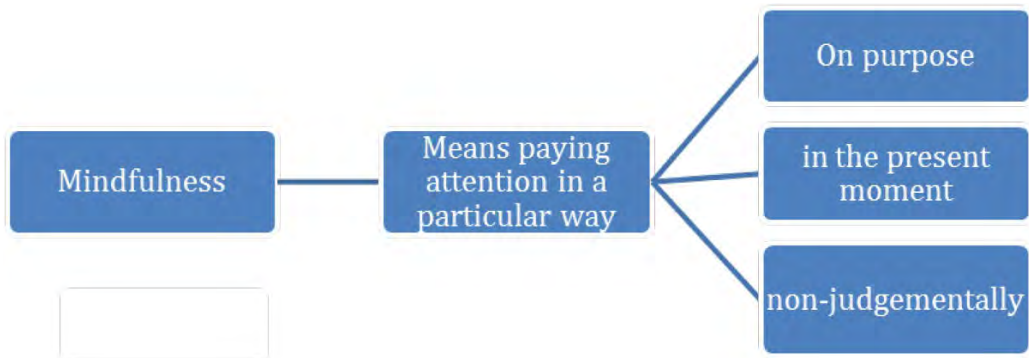


Figure 1: Mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn 2005)

The nursery managers in the group have realised that as the wellbeing of the child rests ultimately in the hands of the person caring for that child, the manager's role is to create a context that supports and enables practitioners to provide appropriate attention 'in this present moment'. They need to be able to account for their actions in such a way that they can demonstrate what impact they are having on the wellbeing of children through their influence on the practitioners, and on the professional contexts in which they are working.

A further learning from the project is the importance of parents, as they are usually the most significant people in a child's life; so it is important that they are an integral part of the process; and that they too understand that how they relate to their child 'in the present moment' is vital to the child's wellbeing. An essential aspect, then, of the professional work of the practitioners and their managers, is how parents are engaged in ways where they feel valued, where their strengths are recognised, and where they are given appropriate support when required. Several of the group members are looking at how they can 'improve their practice' in relation to the work with parents; and on realising the significance and need for this, the local authority have commissioned an extension of the inquiry to allow for this to be explored more fully.

An additional learning of group members is the realisation of their value and importance in the lives of children; and this has added greatly to their confidence. Many of their initial accounts communicated a lack of confidence, rooted either in childhood experiences, or being encouraged to enter into a job that does not have a high social status. They are now committed to finding ways of evidencing what they do, and are planning a conference where they will showcase their findings, and promote the significance of their role to an invited audience including academics, senior managers and local politicians. The message they want to communicate is that if every person who wants to make a positive difference to the wellbeing of children were to think about

- What really mattered to them;
- How they would like to make a difference;
- What the values are that are motivating them to have this intention;
- How they could put those values into practice;
- And then they paid attention 'in the moment':
- To how they put those values into practice;
- Recognised any 'living contradictions';
- Attempted over time to 'narrow the gap' between their values, and values into practice;
- Then over time practice would improve in ways that could be evidenced and validated.

The motivation of group members to both improve their practice, and to bring into the public domain accounts of how they have improved their practice to the benefit of the wellbeing of children is increasing both on an individual and on a collective level as the project develops.

## **Systemic influence of the project**

The project has been financially supported by commissioning managers within the city council. An interim report was written for the management group responsible for the budget (Walton, 2010). In addition, one of the managers undertook her own evaluation of the project by interviewing a sample of the participants in the project. Without exception the feedback was positive with practitioners providing examples of the impact on themselves, on practice within the setting, and on communication between different settings:

Being part of the collaborative inquiry is like being on a journey rather than a course. It is an open ended journey that has different stages without a pass or fail. I feel valued, and privileged to be a part of this project. I now have a different view, I feel inspired, I don't feel stale and I am not lonely. (Participant 1)

Staff are more committed to spending their time with children without allowing themselves to be distracted. There is more attention paid to the interaction with the child. Staff are more supportive of each other, and the quality of supervision sessions has improved. Since being on the programme we are more open with parents. Parents are interested in what we are doing, and we have many willing volunteers to help us improve what we do with children. (Participant 2)

We used to be very competitive with other day nurseries. That is no longer the case. Through getting to know each other in the collaborative inquiry and sharing ideas, experiences and problems, this has improved relationships, and I feel there is now less competition between colleagues from the other settings involved. (Participant 3)

As a consequence, the project has now been extended to youth services and out-of-school settings. Although there is uncertainty concerning the implications of severe budget cuts in the public sector (as of January 2011), there is currently an intention to integrate this process of research, learning and development into next year's workforce development plan. Through engaging with the individuals and committees that influence funding and gaining their positive response to the impact on the settings so far involved, there is evidence to demonstrate the systemic influence that is possible through an inquiry of this kind

which integrates collaborative inquiry with a living theory approach to Action Research.

This goes some way to addressing Noffke's (1997) criticism of living theories, where she suggests:

As vital as such a process of self-awareness (through living theory) is to identifying the contradictions between one's espoused theories and one's practices, perhaps because of its focus on individual learning, it only begins to address the social basis of personal belief systems. ... As such, it seems incapable of addressing social issues in terms of the interconnections between personal identity and the claim of experiential knowledge, as well as power and privilege in society. The process of personal transformation through the examination of practice and self-reflection may be a necessary part of social change, especially in education; it is however, not sufficient (Noffke, 1997, p. 329).

The evidence of the collaborative inquiry project, given that it is providing the context for individuals to develop their own living theories, suggests that when people gain the opportunity to share what they learn as a result of 'creating and living their theory', there can be transformational changes. The effect of these as they ripple out has the potential to have a systemic impact.

It is recognised that the evidence to support this is so far relatively limited. As the project progresses the processes involved in this will merit further exploration.

## **Conclusions**

The main purpose of this paper has been to challenge the effectiveness of traditional forms of research in generating the knowledge required to improve the wellbeing of children and young people. In terms of future praxis, it has been argued that there is a need to develop research methodologies that will focus on the resolution of real issues impacting on child wellbeing. The core contention is that such research needs to be grounded in the experience of practitioners who work directly with the children, and to

identify ways in which they can be supported in the process of researching their own practice.

A process of collaborative inquiry was introduced as a means of enabling practitioners and managers to engage in reflective dialogue about the significance of their role, and to explore what they could do to improve the wellbeing of children. Recognising their different motivations and cultural backgrounds, each person was encouraged to create their own living theory, including what mattered to them, what their values were, and how they could improve what they did to make a difference to the lives of the children in their care. The action plans they created as a result of this process became meaningful and dynamic guides to action.

In creating their living theory, practitioners were encouraged to give an account of their original contribution to promoting the wellbeing of children, and to provide evidence of their claims to do so. This process was initially slow to develop due to their lack of confidence in themselves, and their difficulty in recognising the value of what they did.

However through sharing their stories and accounts in the group setting, and recognising the value and worth of each other, they slowly began to value themselves. There was a consequent increase in their belief that they had a significant role to play in becoming knowledge creators who could contribute to the research agenda in relation to child wellbeing.

Through developments in the workplace, and presenting their new knowledge to those working in other parts of the system, the practitioners began to make a critical impact on the decision making of managers and policy makers, demonstrated by the expansion of the project into a wider range of children's services. However the prevailing culture, particularly in the current political climate, prioritises hierarchical authority and performance targets rather than personal values and notions of individual responsibility. To influence such a culture from a grassroots level upwards is

going to take continuing commitment from those impassioned to make transformative changes. To that extent, this paper represents a 'work in progress'.

The integration of individual and collective forms of inquiry has so far proven to be a powerful methodology for generating knowledge that aids this process, and addresses questions that focus on the flourishing of future generations. Through the empowering of individuals working at a grassroots level within a collaborative inquiry context, it offers a way of 'transforming the world through transforming self'.

As each person becomes more confident in their own value, there is a growing commitment to use their own learning to influence the learning of others in the workplace and the wider organisation for the benefit of children and young people. This process is in its early stages; however the project has demonstrated the value of exploring further the contribution that an integration of collaborative inquiry and living theory can make to a future praxis which will explore the dynamic inter-relationship between the individual and the collective as means of influencing change for the social good at a systemic level.

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## About the author

**Dr Joan Walton's** professional career has included many years as a social worker, manager, educator, and consultant

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# Reflections on a Multi-Sector Action Research Collaboration: The researchers' perspectives

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In an era of collaborative research, academics are increasingly encouraged and even expected to develop and conduct research in partnership with private, public and/or community sector stakeholders. However, while reflections on and within research are increasingly common, reflections on the management of a multi-sector research collaboration are less so. This paper presents results, from the researcher's perspective, of a reflective process which explored the successes or otherwise of research management within one such Action Research project. A conceptual model which identifies factors inherent to *capacity to collaborate* was used to guide data collection and inform data analysis. Overall, results from the reflective process confirm the challenges that

arise when a diverse group of people from dissimilar organizations 'come together' aspiring to implement a successful multi-sector Action Research collaboration.

## **Introduction**

There is increasing emphasis on people working together or collaborating to address a range of social, health, environmental and/or community issues that are complex, and require a diverse input of expertise and resources (Bloomfield, Collins, Fry & Munton, 2001; Brown, 2006). Similarly, collaboration between researchers on the one hand, and public, private and community sector stakeholders (hereafter collectively labelled research partners) on the other hand, is increasingly encouraged and is at times a prerequisite for research funding. For example, in Australia major national competitive funding schemes, such as the Australian Research Council Linkage Program, are designed specifically to build and strengthen research partnerships between academics and these sectors.

Such partnerships are important as they strengthen linkages between research, policy and practice (Chaitin, 2009), while also providing the potential for mutually beneficial outcomes for all partners (Buchy & Ahmed, 2007). This is described in terms of the ideal relationship between (academic) researchers and research partners:

There appears to be general harmony in expectations of collaboration between academic researchers and their industry partners. Industry partners are usually seeking a solution to a problem, access to specialist expertise, and development of a more enduring relationship with universities. Academic partners are typically looking for the opportunity to conduct useful research and apply their ideas in an industry context, to train postgraduate students, and to extend their interactions with industry (Turpin, Aylward, Garrett-Jones, Speak, Grigg & Johnston, 1999, p. ix).

There is a long history of inquiry relating to the idea and practice of research collaboration (Cuthill, 2010; Legler & Reischl, 2003; Hoatson & Egan, 2001). Recent articles in the *Journal of Research Practice* reveal the breadth of topics being

explored by collaborative research teams whether cross-national (*e.g.* Chaitin, 2009), interdisciplinary (*e.g.* Sherren, Klovdahl, Robin, Butler & Dovers, 2009) and between academia and non-academic sectors (*e.g.* Nickelsen, 2009). They examine **some** of the methodological, political and interpersonal dynamics inherent in such research. However, of the many research projects involving academic, private sector, community and/or government partnerships funded **each** year in Australia and elsewhere, there appear to be few reports focusing on management within a multi-sector research collaboration. For example, when exploring international research collaborations Billot, Goddard & Cranston (2006, p. 43) found “... there is limited research that provides guidance on how to undertake research collaboratively ... and facilitate constructive working alliances with successful project processes”.

In addressing this gap the authors implemented a formal reflective process to identify challenges faced within one multi-sector research collaboration and factors impacting on the effectiveness of the collaboration, as well as exploration of assumptions about capacities of academic and other research partners to collaborate effectively. Schön (1983) suggests that reflective practice can involve two key components; *reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action*. Reflection-in-action entails an iterative process of examining and if necessary modifying practice during an event. Reflection-on-action refers to a retrospective and systematic analysis of one’s actions (Leitch & Day, 2000; Russell & Munby, 1992). The latter approach best describes work undertaken for this paper, as the reflective process was implemented after completion of research.

This paper begins with a broad contextual overview of the three year *Collaborative approach to ageing well in the community* project. This is followed by a methodology section which describes the capacity to collaborate framework used to guide data collection and analysis. The third section,

*Researchers' reflections on the research collaboration*, details results from data analysis under the three key components of the capacity to collaborate framework – 1) contexts, 2) processes, and 3) capitals. The concluding section discusses some of the key learning for the research team, relating to management of a multi-sector Action Research collaboration.

Overall, it can be expected that reflection on the collaboration between academics and their research partners will help develop or further enhance necessary skills and capacity required to develop and implement collaborative research projects so overcoming some of the challenges identified and more fully realizing the potential benefits of multi-sector research collaborations. This is the intent of the present paper.

## **The research context**

The Collaborative Approach to Ageing Well in the Community (CAAM) project was a three-year Australian Research Council Linkage project, the aim of which was to develop and implement a model of local collaboration to address an issue related to ageing well. The project was implemented by researchers from the University of Queensland in partnership with two Queensland local governments and the Queensland Department of Communities. Research was undertaken at two case study sites using an Action Research methodology. Action research moves away from the “expert” delivery of knowledge from academics *to* the people, to a co-production of new knowledge and shared understandings as a basis for collaborative local action (Cuthill, 2010; Rahman, 1993). As a collaborative research approach, Action Research is founded on trusting and respectful relationships between project participants. It links academic theory to practice through an iterative process of reflective learning involving diverse stakeholders (Boyer, 1996; Habermas, 1989).

The CAAM project was conducted in five stages:

- A scoping study to give a picture of the over 50s population in each community and the organisations, activities and services available for older people;
- A series of interviews with stakeholders in the community (seniors' community groups, organisations providing services for older people and others working with seniors) regarding key requirements for ageing well and areas for action, as well as requisites for successful collaboration<sup>1</sup>;
- A series of workshops to prioritise areas for community action, develop relationships between stakeholders and establish a collaborative group in each of two research communities;
- Regular meetings of the collaborative groups at each of the two case study sites at which participants planned and implemented a project; and
- Evaluation of the project's process and immediate outcomes.

The project evolved from a previous research project (see Cuthill & Warburton, 2005) which had prompted discussion between researchers and government officers regarding the need for a better understanding of how to develop collaborative local responses to issues around ageing well in community. Two local governments and a state government agency indicated a desire to progress a research project to explore this issue. Each of the three research partner agencies allocated annual funding to the project for a three-year period. Total funding from the three agencies was matched through a Commonwealth research funding scheme specifically designed to encourage closer research collaboration between academia and practitioners and policy-makers. The three agencies and the university

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<sup>1</sup> These data were used to inform development of a model of factors influencing collaboration (Warburton, Everingham, Cuthill & Bartlett, 2008).



research team constituted the four research partners. Governance and operational arrangements for the project were agreed after discussions among these project partners.

These arrangements included establishment of a Project Steering Committee involving the three academic research leaders (named as Chief Investigators on the grant documents), a project officer and research assistant, and one nominated representative from each of the three government agencies. Additional government representatives also attended as alternate group members and provided input to Project Steering Committee meetings when required. This committee had direct oversight for the research and primarily focused on the big picture governance of the project. These governance arrangements looked to link high quality research with provision of an evidence base to serve their policy and operational requirements.

Research quality, ethics requirements, financial accountability and research implementation were the responsibility of the Research Team which comprised the five academic staff involved in the project. The role of the Research Team was to take the big picture of the partners and transform this into a feasible research project. The overlap in membership between the project steering committee and research team was designed to facilitate an ongoing dialogue linking together the conceptual and operational aspects of the project.

Under this oversight, in each of the two case study communities, a Working Action Group made up of service providers, community organizations and individual seniors simultaneously worked together in an Action Research process to design and implement a local collaborative project to address a self identified issue relating to ageing well. These two case studies were the core focus of the CAAM project (Everingham, et al, 2011). Identification of the key community issue, design of the proposed solution, implementation of that solution, and review of its

effectiveness were undertaken collaboratively by researchers and community participants, with the research team facilitating the process.

It was agreed among research partners that the project would adopt an iterative and flexible approach to enable quick responses to emerging directions and/or opportunities. This approach was facilitated through regular Project Steering Committee and Research Team meetings, email newsletters to a broad stakeholder audience, Working Action Group workshops and various review processes where project partners and participants could discuss the research as it progressed. This formative evaluation during the project focused on research practice and the collaboration in the Working Action Groups. On completion of the project the research team acknowledged a gap relating to reflection on the collaborative research management.

This paper addresses that gap and reflects on collaboration within the core management of the project, drawing on primary and secondary data relating to both the Project Steering Committee and Research Team. Drawing from the researchers' perspective, this discussion adds to existing knowledge about what makes research collaboration effective, and provides direction towards building capacity for collaboration within research management teams.

## **Analysis framework**

A conceptual framework relating to capacity to collaborate (Figure 1) was developed during the CAAM project (Everingham, et al, 2011). This framework illustrates how successful collaboration is built upon and impacted by a set of *capitals* which are embedded within specific *processes*, which are in turn embedded within broader *contexts*.

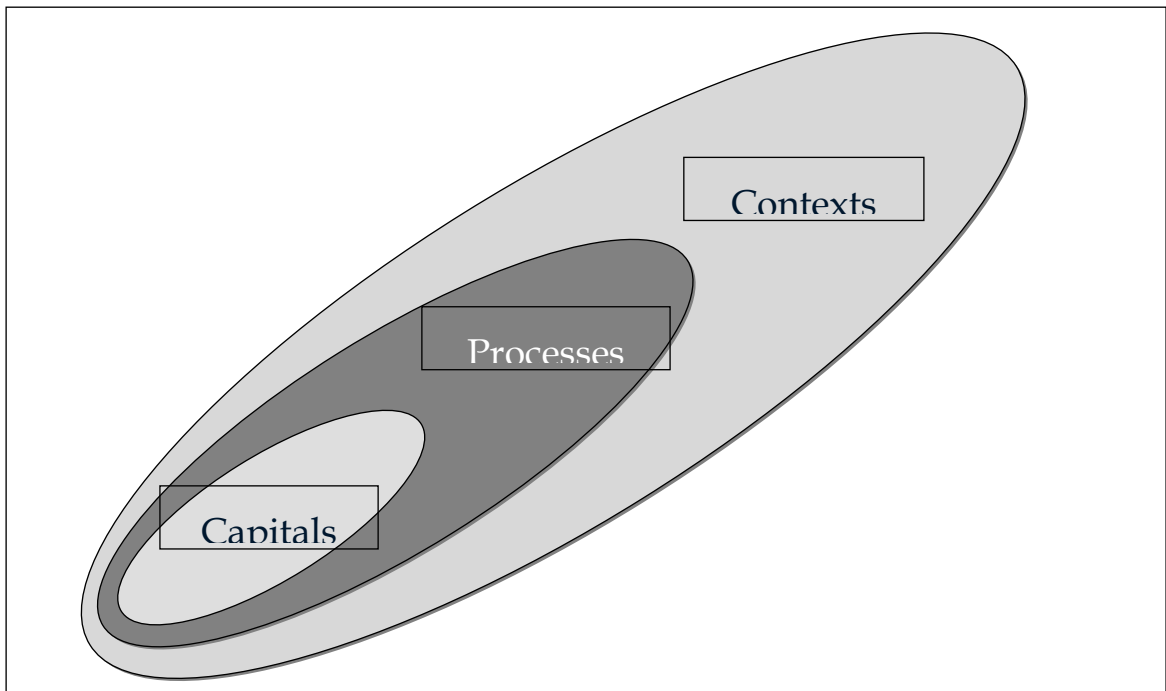


Figure 1: Conceptual framework for capacity to collaborate (Everingham, et al, 2011).

Various forms of capital (or skills, assets and resources) are seen as enabling collaborative initiatives focused on achieving common goals (Hudson, 2004). Four commonly identified forms of capital, which contribute to successful collaboration, are human capital (Pope & Warr, 2005; Cuthill, 2003), social capital (Gray, 2009; Keast, Mandell, Brown & Woolcock, 2004), institutional capital (Bolda, Saucier, Maddox, Wetle & Isaacs Lowe, 2006; Lowndes & Wilson, 2001) and material capital (Hudson, 2004; Rousoss & Fawcett, 2000). These capitals are embedded within three key processes highlighted in the literature as enabling collaboration. These are communication processes (Jones & Thomas, 2007; Mandell, 2001), problem-solving processes (Lasker & Weiss, 2003; Weber, Lovrich & Gaffney, 2007), and knowledge-transfer processes (Baugh Littlejohns & Smith, 2008; Weber & Khademian, 2008).

In turn, both the capitals and processes are situated within specific political, cultural, geographical and/or historical contexts (Hunter, 2006). These contexts influence the interaction between the capitals and processes, either assisting realisation of latent capacity to collaborate, or constraining collaborative efforts (Mandell, 2001). An appropriate balance between these three interdependent factors constitutes capacity to collaborate (Hudson, 2004; Hunter, 2006). This framework was used to guide data collection and inform data analysis for the reflective process.

Primary data was collected using a structured approach drawing on the three core components of the conceptual framework to guide participant's responses. At the time the five researchers were based in four different cities, so an open email group was used, where all participants could view and build on each other's comments. This process allowed the five Research Team members to progressively record, review and build a retrospective reflection on the research collaboration. Initially, it was intended to include local and state government research partners in this reflective process, however, due to relocations and time constraints, this was not possible and this paper presents the researchers' perspective.

Secondary data used to inform the reflective process included recorded notes and/or minutes, collected during the three years of research, from Project Steering Committee and Research Team meetings. Other data, from Working Action Group workshops and structured evaluation processes, are drawn on in this paper to illustrate some of the issues faced in developing the multi-sector research collaboration. Data was systematically coded against the three core components (*i.e.* contexts, processes and capitals) of the capacity to collaborate framework. A total of eleven research collaboration sub-themes, relevant to this specific project were identified (Table 1).

Table 1: Primary data collection framework

Thematic area	Sub-themes identified through analysis of academics' reflections on the research collaboration.
Context	Agency policy, strategy and commitment.
Processes	Communications, knowledge sharing, decision-making and managing expectations.
Capitals	Individual skills and knowledge, resources, relationships and leadership.

The following section provides detailed discussion of the researchers' reflections on the research collaboration, presented under each of the three core components of capacity to collaborate – 1) contexts, 2) processes and 3) capitals.

## **Researchers' reflections on the research collaboration**

### **Context: Agency policy, strategy and commitment**

The ageing focus of the research was a topical issue for our research partners. The initial high level of interest shown by local and state government was demonstrated through their funding and in-kind support for the project.

However, the actual level of involvement and interest from each partner agency subsequently changed over the course of the three-year project, largely influenced by variations in policy priorities. For example, State Government ageing policy was in transition during the project, moving from a specific ageing policy, *Our Shared Future: Queensland's Framework for Ageing 2000-2004*, to a broader strategic policy, *Toward Q2: Tomorrow's Queensland*, which does not explicitly identify ageing issues as a current or future challenge for the state. In addition, staffing of the state government Office for Seniors was significantly reduced over the period of the research.

Likewise, the focus of the Local Government Association of Queensland (LGAQ – the peak organization for local governments in Queensland) with respect to ageing issues appeared to stall with emerging high profile policy areas, such as multiculturalism and climate change, taking precedence. LGAQ operational imperatives, such as local government boundary changes and amalgamations, and the global financial crisis, also shifted local government attention away from an ageing agenda. Lack of LGAQ attention to ageing issues appeared to have flow-on implications for the two local government project partners. One council that participated in the research did adopt an *Ageing Action Plan* during the first year of the project, but an election and change of elected representatives led to less attention being paid to ageing issues. At the start of the project, the second participating council had a *Draft Ageing Strategy* that had not been formally endorsed, and a clear policy mandate to progress it was lacking.

Despite the policy fluctuations during the three-year project, the legal commitment of partner agencies to the project was maintained. However, the operational commitment from individuals was at times uncertain, a situation possibly related to the aforementioned vagueness around each agency's policy directions for ageing. More recently, all three partner agencies are once again looking to strengthen their ageing policy. Most notably, in late 2009, State Government produced a discussion paper, titled *Positively Ageless - Developing a Queensland Seniors' Strategy*, and in 2010 released *Positively Ageless – Queensland Seniors Strategy 2010–20*, and an accompanying action plan for 2010–12. Thus, while the policy context did not consistently prioritize ageing during the project period, operational commitment was maintained to a reasonable level, and the ageing policy focus did appear to be re-emerging towards the end of the project. Changes such as these highlight the challenges that can arise in conducting research with government agencies,

whose policy priorities may change at different times, or at a different rate, from the research cycle.

It was of particular importance with regard to the success of the research collaboration that individuals who represented the three partner agencies on the Project Steering Committee were government officers with responsibility for, and interest in, ageing issues. As such, these officers had a personal commitment to the project and in achieving better outcomes for older people, although agency re-structures, re-location of personnel and career moves did impact on this. Within this evolving context, much attention was directed by the Research Team towards establishing clear and agreed governance, communication and information sharing processes for the project.

### **Processes: Communications, knowledge sharing, decision-making and managing expectations**

A communication plan was established early in the project and was enhanced as new requirements emerged. As this was a large scale, multi-sector project run over three years at two different sites, there was a clear and agreed focus on formal rather than informal channels of communication. Various communication methods were identified to cater to a diverse range of stakeholder requirements. For example, a large group of interested stakeholders received regular newsletter updates on the project. These were stakeholders who might not be directly involved in the project, but were paying some attention to research results.

Of most relevance to this paper are the internal communications processes among the Project Steering Committee members. These included a key focus on quarterly committee meetings, but also relied heavily on email, a communication method preferred by committee members due to busy and oftentimes conflicting schedules, and the travel distance between the three agencies and university involved in the project. However, the email option

resulted in largely one-way information provision, from researchers to other committee members. There was at times some difficulty eliciting responses using email. Additional effort from the Research Team to maintain a dialogue around the project included informal phone conversations, one-on-one meetings with committee members, and presentations at partner agency conferences and similar events.

One key opportunity sought within the multi-sector research collaboration was to draw on the diverse knowledge and experience of the partners. The intention within the CAAM project was that the Research Team members would provide academic knowledge from the literature and personal research experience, and the research partners would provide practice-based knowledge from an organizational and personal perspective (Brown, 2006). This would serve to link theory and practice through an iterative process of reflective learning involving these diverse project partners (Boyer, 1996; Gibbons, Limoges, Nowotny, Schwartzman, Scott & Trow, 1994; Habermas, 1989). The researchers' reflections indicate the extent of these exchanges and endorse their value to the collaboration.

Knowledge sharing from our research partners helped link research with policy directions and operational requirements. Theoretical and case study findings from other places presented by the Research Team provided a broader understanding of ageing issues to inform ongoing policy development and opportunities for new operational initiatives. One standing agenda item for Project Steering Committee meetings that worked particularly well to facilitate such exchanges was a system of alternating presentations by members of the Research Team and each agency partner. The Research Team presentations covered literature reviews, data or findings relating to the project, while the partners' presentations related to ageing policy or operational initiatives within each agency.



This system facilitated knowledge-sharing, prompted discussion on presentation topics, and provided opportunities for looking beyond the project boundaries. As such, knowledge sharing processes were seen as a key factor contributing to project outcomes, as well as building collaborative capacity and personal relationships within the Project Steering Committee. These processes helped satisfy both the partners' desire for evidence to inform policy and practice, and the researchers' desire for practice-relevant research. They also served to highlight the diverse contributions of all Steering Committee members and hence empower research partner representatives and foster commitment to the project.

A strong communication focus was intended to provide ongoing opportunities for problems to be discussed and the knowledge transfer and learning was intended to underpin formulation of appropriate responses by the Project Steering Committee. This intent was only partially achieved and reflections on problem-solving and decision-making processes identified some reservations. For example, quarterly committee meetings turned out to be too infrequent to allow genuine involvement of partners in some of the research decision making, much of which ended up occurring at the monthly Research Team meetings. Engaging research partners in review processes, particularly outside of meeting times proved difficult, and there was some reluctance to spend time on associated project tasks. In one locality there was noticeably greater engagement. Researchers attributed this, in part, to the Steering Committee local government representative's active participation in the Working Action Group there. Further interaction and collaboration between the Project Steering Committee and the Working Action Groups may have helped build knowledge transfer and increased the sense of ownership, however, this level of involvement proved difficult to build within other agencies' time constraints. In

this context, industry partners may become over-burdened, particularly in a constrained resource environment.

A particular challenge in establishing robust collaborative decision-making processes was posed by balancing research imperatives for flexible, responsive operations with more rigid internal processes of partner agencies. Several occasions arose where individual research partners did not feel they had the authority to deviate from the defined project plan, and subsequently sought approval for new project initiatives from more senior members of their agency. In these cases written propositions were drafted and discussed internally by each agency before agreement among project partners could be reached. Response times were slow and the process impacted on project flexibility and did not facilitate collaborative decision making. As a result, internal agency processes did at times constrain effective functioning of the Project Steering Committee.

Project direction and deliverables were agreed in early meetings, albeit with the need for a certain degree of flexibility acknowledged by all partners. As such, the intent of the research was well understood by all initial partners. Problem-solving processes in terms of decision-making and negotiation were also broadly agreed at the outset. Overall, these processes did not effectively harness the diversity and synergies in the Project Steering Committee. This was evidenced through the ongoing challenge of adjusting expectations and agreeing on research purpose and outputs. Despite a shared interest in achieving ageing well outcomes, problem-solving processes were perhaps not robust enough to cope with divergent ideas of what constituted a solution and powerful counter-imperatives within individual partner contexts.

These changing or evolving expectations created some frustrations and meant, in several instances, that renegotiation of outcomes had to take place. For example, the research team had expected that our research partners

would provide an entrée for ideas to influence policy and development of a broad model for collaborative responses to ageing, whereas our partner expectations shifted towards access to specialist expertise and an output of toolkits. This negotiation within the Project Steering Committee was an ongoing and time consuming (but necessary) task that indicated basic and applied research are not necessarily incompatible but that there are tensions between them that may be eased by enhancing problem-solving capacities.

### **Capitals: Individual skills and knowledge, resources, relationships and leadership**

At the start of the project, human capital requirements were considered appropriate to support project objectives, with the Project Steering Committee comprising a diverse range of skills, knowledge and abilities. This included academic members with different research experience, methodological strengths and areas of disciplinary expertise across ageing, engagement, community development and social policy. As well, research partner representatives had varied expertise and experience in social policy and operations of different departments and levels of government. However, research partner expertise varied greatly after initial members of the committee left the project and new representatives took their place. In particular, understanding of the Action Research process used for the project at each study site varied during the course of the project and was an ongoing focus of discussion and negotiation with partners. This highlighted the importance of ongoing communication about the nature and purpose of the research approach that had been adopted.

On paper, the project was well-resourced to achieve its stated aims, with appropriate funding and in-kind contributions from partners. The in-kind contributions, largely relating to involvement in the Project Steering Committee but also involving some operational support at

the two study sites, were seen as a tangible commitment to the collaboration; a commitment formally endorsed by their respective agencies. However, fulfilment of in-kind pledges varied, both from partner to partner, and also during the course of the project and as agency personnel changed.

Membership of the committee was limited to one representative from each of our research partner agencies. This was a pragmatic choice to ensure the committee was small enough to deliver effective decision making processes. In addition, the Research Team was looking to build deep relationships with each agency representative during the three-year project, to help facilitate an effective working partnership and strengthen social capital.

Some established relationships, among Project Steering Committee members, streamlined the research development process and provided a solid and egalitarian starting point for the collaboration, ensuring a strong team rapport early in the project. The effectiveness of working relationships did suffer when some of the initial research partner representatives subsequently left the project, new members took their place, and personal relationships had to be re-established. The representative of one of the research partners remained constant throughout the project, resulting in a greater commitment to the research, and specifically, consistency in implementing the research at one of the case study sites, as well as in sustaining project momentum. While existing social capital was helpful in establishing the collaboration, it was not maintained to the same level within the Project Steering Committee over the three years of the project. The shifting levels of social capital were seen to impact on operational processes.

Two members of the Research Team acted as secretariat to the project, with the role of chair rotated among the three Chief Investigators named on the grant. This arrangement was supported by all project partners as likely to maintain consistency while not concentrating leadership too much.

However, over time and with new agency representatives joining the Project Steering Committee, the dynamics of the collaboration subtly changed, with much leadership of the project moving unintentionally to the Research Team, such that research partners may have felt somewhat disempowered within the collaborative process. The extent to which the Project Steering Committee steered the research, especially in the second half of the project, was not as clear as originally intended. As a result, the primary oversight role of this committee became confused amid the operational necessity for quick decisions to be made.

Research collaboration would have been more consistent if an ongoing leadership role was maintained by one or more of our research partners. Arguably, the level of confidence of research partners who do not have research training to take such a leadership role might constrain such an arrangement and the degree of trust between partners may not facilitate it. In addition, while research is core business for the academic partners, it is a secondary role for other partners who are unlikely to have spare time to devote to an extra workload, and are thus unlikely to take up a leadership role. This presents a challenge for sustaining equal and active research partnerships such as that intended here, in which all those involved are engaged with and in the research.

## **Conclusions**

The reflective data, which has been summarized above, identifies some clear learnings and challenges that can be taken from this specific project experience. These relate to different areas of the management process and different aspects of collaboration.

First, the issue of leadership highlights an important dilemma for collaborative research projects involving multi-sector partners. It has been noted that the leadership role was, over time, assumed by the Research Team. This meant that a considerable amount of control was held by the

researchers, an outcome far removed from the original collaborative intent of the project. Combined with the erosion of the power of some representatives within their own agencies, this had the effect of concentrating knowledge and expertise in relation to the project and so creating a power imbalance in the Steering Committee too (see Bargal 2008 for a detailed discussion on imbalances if facilitators and partners do not have equal access to actionable knowledge).

The reality of the research relationship was such that the broader project development was largely university-led, with funding held by the university. In many ways this reality was influenced by the system of funding and administration in which research such as this takes place. This suggests that challenges exist in negotiating conflicts between the structures governing academic research and research funding, and the principles of truly collaborative research. As the project progressed and this outcome became more pronounced, the governance role of the Project Steering Committee became confused.

Confusion over governance arrangements is likely to have contributed to the varying level of commitment from the research partners, a situation that was exacerbated as new members became involved during the course of the project. However, there is also a challenge with respect to the focus of problem-solving and decision-making for collaborative research in that engagement with partners and servicing their policy and operational needs must be balanced with achievement of academic outcomes and accountability. These findings resonate with those of Buchy and Ahmed (2007) in their reflections of a three-year Action Research project with NGOs in India, where they found different levels of accountability between academic and industry partners. Researchers are expected to produce academic deliverables, in terms of developments in theory and empirical findings, whereas other partners are accountable to

their various constituents and seek to make a difference to their field of work. Although not necessarily mutually exclusive, the realities are likely to create tensions (Buchy & Ahmed, 2007).

In terms of future praxis in this area, an important ongoing negotiation which needs to be addressed is that between the principles of collaboration, and the structured environment in which both the academic and government partners operate. As noted, the funding and administrative structures within academic research and the hierarchical and bureaucratic arrangements within partner agencies often seemed at odds with the collaborative, participatory intention of our research and were a source of some challenges. These differences proved difficult to reconcile throughout the course of the project.

Agreement regarding project outcomes emerged as an important issue within this collaboration. Expectations of both academic and government research partners, negotiated and agreed at the start of the project did vary as the project progressed. In particular, the emergence of some new expectations quite late in the project, along with lack of clarity relating to involvement in and support of fieldwork, and other in-kind contributions to the project, was a source of some tension. This suggests that being clear about the degree of flexibility in arrangements and any boundaries at an early stage is vital to avoid tensions, as is the need to make sure all partners at all stages of the project have time to discuss their expectations. If new expectations cannot be accommodated within the project timeframes or resources, this should be made clear. One particular tension was the divergent understandings of the Action Research paradigm at the sites and the researchers' feeling of inadequacy in facilitating Steering Committee discussions of the unfolding Action Research that moved beyond information exchange and description to critical reflection and potential for policy

change. Buchy and Ahmed (2007) report a similar challenge when working with practitioner partners.

While high-level bureaucratic support is important for gaining initial buy-in from industry partners, the importance of the individual, who engages at the collaborative project level, was highlighted repeatedly during the course of the research. Changes in agency representatives had an ongoing impact on the collaboration. New relationships had to be established, agreed outcomes had to be reiterated or renegotiated, and new committee members had to be brought up to speed on the purpose and nature of the research. More effective changeover processes or closer involvement by higher level staff may have helped to minimise this outcome. Our experience suggests that the observation of Schensul, et al (2008), that the formation and continuity of good relationships is critical, apply not only to Action Research with marginalized groups but also to collaborative research management with ostensibly equal research partners. This was important to the project at hand, and also to the potential for ongoing collaboration with the individuals and with their agencies.

This paper presents an exploration of these issues from the academics' perspective and has yielded some valuable lessons about collaborating with other researchers, policy-makers and practitioners over research intended to result in change that is responsive to community voices. Clearly further research is now needed from the perspective of industry partners to further develop our capacity to collaborate across sectoral boundaries. This would be an important addition, as there are gaps in terms of industry partner's perceptions of the role of researchers, their experience of and commitment to Action Research, and whether they considered that their organizations appropriately supported implementation of the Action Research process. Future research is needed to include



reflections from all the partners involved in collaborative research projects.

This reflection has allowed us to examine our beliefs and ways of working and to interrogate some implicit assumptions of collaborative research such as the limits to bringing policy, practice and research closer together. It has highlighted some often unacknowledged influences in managing multi-sector collaborative research projects and how these shape the way research results are produced, organised and perceived/received. Disagreement over issues such as intellectual property rights, balancing expert and grounded knowledge, academic requirements to publish or perish, and research partner imperatives to deliver quick-fix solutions to problems inhibited full realization of the capacity to collaborate in our Steering Committee (Mandell, 2001). Issues of relationship building and consensus interacted with broader aspects of the research funding, administrative and policy environment. Many of the challenges reported here reflect the notion of the 'politics of collaboration' (Beattie, Cheek & Gibson, 1996) at both micro and macro levels, with its implicit reference to power relations. Our findings appear to support the assertions of Beattie, et al (1996) that it is naïve to assume that 'good will' is sufficient to overcome challenges to collaboration, without consideration of the politics at play.

Perhaps there is a need to question any assumption that a diverse group of people from dissimilar organizations with different agendas and formalized bureaucratic operating procedures can just come together and successfully collaborate on a research project that is core business of just one of the partners – the academics. If so, better understanding of capacity to collaborate becomes a key consideration for organizations before a multi-sector project commences. As such, the concept of capacity to collaborate provides not only a useful evaluation framework, as evidenced through its use in this paper, but also an

important guide to help plan collaborative research. This is particularly the case since it allows an appreciation of the politics in the context and also other components of capacity to collaborate over research.

Models of collaboration such as that used in this paper provide a useful starting point for thinking about the factors which impact on collaborative ventures and ways to enhance the capacity of researchers to work in collaboration with research partners so as to enhance links between theory and practice in future research collaborations. This paper presents an academic perspective as a starting point for further exploration of this topic.

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# But I'm Not Doing Action Research!

Linda Henderson

Bringing Participatory Action Research and poststructuralist theories together can present ontological tensions. This paper is a discussion of my attempt to work with these tensions by drawing on the philosophy of Deleuze and in particular his concept of desire. I report on a Participatory Action Research project where this Deleuzian desire was brought to the analysis of data. By doing so I argue that what is highlighted is the potential that this Deleuzian desire, with its focus on micropolitics, has for Participatory Action Research. Based on this work I then present a Deleuzian framework for Participatory Action Research with "desire" as the driving force: a framework that I argue holds potential for future participatory praxis.

## Introduction

*"But I'm not doing Action Research!"* There was a smile; a nod and then the reply that left me more anxious as I tried reconcile the difficulties that I was experiencing during this time of fieldwork. With two years having passed since this encounter I can reflect back on it, and its subsequent calm acknowledgement, with an appreciation for the openness that was afforded me to live my struggles. But at the time I found it incredibly frustrating. It provoked sensations that played on the surface of my body. I was angry with myself; I felt I was failing as a researcher. I was frustrated; how was I going to collect data that would answer my research question when this Participatory Action Research (PAR) project seemed to have a life of its own? There was also another deeper layer to this frustration. A layer that was



shooting through my very sense of whom I was and opening me up to new sensations that were both confronting yet, simultaneously, exciting.

I have commenced this paper with this reflection on what was a time of struggle as I navigated my fieldwork as a PhD student having developed a PAR project. During this time I found myself becoming increasingly troubled with the tensions that I encountered when I tried to reconcile what I was doing within the critical paradigm from which Action Research is positioned, with my own ontological positioning within poststructuralist feminism. This was a troubling that I have likened to what Brown and Jones describe, for I felt that I was “immersed in that which I [was seeking] to disrupt” (Brown & Jones, 2001, p.104). How could I disrupt it when I was simultaneously inside of it?

Exactly what was troubling me were the tensions that I saw in the work of those who had attempted to merge PAR with poststructuralist theories (cf: Cameron & Gibson, 2005; Carson & Sumara, 1997; Gibson-Graham, 1994; Luce-Kapler, 1997; Mac Naughton, 2005; Stronach & MacLure, 1997). Whilst I saw the potential of this work and the manner in which it had extended the possibilities for PAR to engage with the micropolitics of the lives of those involved, I could not fully reconcile it with PAR. This was largely due to poststructuralist theory’s questioning of the very reality of the material world when I saw PAR as being so very deeply concerned with the materiality of the lives of those involved. However, engaging with a paper by Drummond and Themessl-Huber (2007) titled; ‘The cyclical process of Action Research: The contribution of Gilles Deleuze’ provided me with the stimulus whereby I could commence the task of thinking anew my relationship with PAR as a feminist poststructuralist researcher.

This paper has therefore been born out of a conference paper that was presented at the 8<sup>th</sup> World Congress 2010: Participatory Action Research and Action Learning

(Henderson, 2010). It was in this paper that I presented my theorising of a Deleuzian framework for the cyclical process of PAR drawing in particular on the concept of desire as theorised by Deleuze. The focus of this paper is therefore to report on my mobilisation of this concept of desire in the analysis of my PhD PAR project. In presenting this project and how this Deleuzian desire assisted in my analysis I am arguing that a Deleuzian desire can offer new ways of working with the micro-politics of the lives of those involved in a PAR project whilst still paying critical attention to the very materiality of these lives. Consequently, this paper is an attempt to elucidate my thinking with(in) Deleuze's philosophy and how it related to this PAR project and my subsequent theorising of a Deleuzian framework for PAR. In committing my thinking here on paper I am conscious that my theorizing is constantly on the move. My desire, therefore, is not to make any grand universalising claims in relation to my mobilisation of a Deleuzian desire within PAR, for this would be in opposition to my own ontological positioning. Rather, my desire is for this paper to be but a moment in the time of my theorizing, captured here. A moment that I liken to Sandvik's description of her own "experiential dizziness" when working with(in) Deleuze's philosophy (Sandvik, 2010, p.30).

I begin this paper with a description of the context of this PAR project including an outline of the research question. This is followed by an elucidation of desire as theorised by Deleuze and its revolutionary potential. I then draw on the data from my PAR project to illustrate the importance of Deleuzian desire and how it informed my analysis. Following this, I introduce the Deleuzian framework that I have theorised based on my reading of Deleuze and how his philosophy has informed my thinking about PAR. This is a framework that positions desire as a driving force in PAR. Finally, I argue that this framework, with desire as the

driving force, holds open new possibilities for future praxis in PAR.

## **Contextualising a PAR project**

The PAR project that I draw on here involved three early childhood teachers working in an early childhood centre located in an Australian independent school and myself as a teacher/researcher. These three early childhood teachers worked together on a daily basis in the Early Childhood Centre located in the independent school. One teacher was the Director of the centre. At the time of commencing the fieldwork I was also a teacher working in the school in the role of Support Services Coordinator having undertaken specialist training in the areas of special and gifted education. Nine months into the fieldwork I resigned from this position and took up an academic appointment.

The project was designed to investigate the learning of these three early childhood teachers. Specifically the research question was: "How is teacher learning produced and enacted within an Early Childhood Centre in an independent school?" The three teachers established as their aim for the project an exploration of the implementation of "Learning Stories" into their current practices. Learning Stories are an assessment tool arising from the TeWhariki curriculum, which is the New Zealand Ministry of Education early childhood curriculum policy statement (Ministry of Education, 1996). Through the cyclical process of Action Research, the initial project plan had us coming together monthly for the three early childhood teachers to increasingly reflect on their practices and their implementation of Learning Stories. A series of books from the New Zealand TeWhariki curriculum were used to assist in the planning of the ongoing learning of this project (cf: Learning Media., 2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 2004d, 2004e). This planning resulted in a series of cycles being developed that loosely followed the three stages of writing a Learning Story:

noticing, recognising, and responding to learning. Due to a variety of structural and personal reasons we only came together for a total of ten meetings over the 12 months of this project. The twelve months spanned over two school years.

In contextualizing this study it is important to highlight that early childhood education had been introduced into this independent school in the mid 1990's. The school itself had a long history of over 100 years. I highlight this, for as the literature that has examined the work of early childhood teachers in a school setting has illuminated, tensions exist between early childhood teachers and primary teachers (cf: Ashby, 1988; Britt & Sumsion, 2003; Goldstein, 1997; Sawyer, 2000; Tinworth, 1997). I make specific reference to this literature to draw attention to the micro-politics that were in operation in this context.

First, whilst having a very close working relationship with each other, one of the teachers was the Director of the Early Childhood Centre, the other two teachers worked underneath her leadership. Second, they were working in a school context whereby accountability to a school leadership team influenced their decision-making processes. Their inclusion in the school leadership team's professional development program was limited, however. The Director of the Early Learning Centre alone attended staff meetings and professional development organised by the school leadership team. The other two early childhood teachers were 'not required' to attend these meetings. In saying this there were times when the Director was also informed that particular meetings were not relevant to early childhood and that she should not attend. These arrangements did impact on their positioning within this school. Finally, at the time of this PAR project the school had entered a certification process to become a Mindful School with The Institute of Habits of Mind (The Institute of Habits of Mind., 2009). This process would come to bear upon this PAR project.

## Desire and PAR

The philosophy of Deleuze is one that believes in the very materiality of the world and has been drawn on widely by feminists working within the 'materialist turn' (cf: Alaimo & Hekman, 2008; Barad, 2008; Braidotti, 2002; Colebrook, 2008; Davies & Gannon, 2009; Haraway, 2008; Haraway, 2008; Taguchi, 2010). This is a critical point when thinking of Deleuze in association with PAR and its concern for the materiality of the lives of those involved in PAR projects. Therefore, to bring the philosophy of Deleuze to PAR I would argue can only be a productive move.

The productivity of this move is captured most clearly in a key Deleuzian concept; that being desire. This productivity is achieved by Deleuze's work with Felix Guattari (Deleuze & Guattari, 1984; Deleuze & Guattari, 2004). They argue that desire is positioned with lack and negation via a universalising history that began with Plato and finished with Freud (Deleuze & Guattari, 1984). Breaking open desire via a move that disrupted this positioning by way of notifying how "standard" notions of desire are essentially tied to an external relationship between two terms: "the desiring subject and the desired object" (Colebrook, 2002b, p.98) they assert that desire is *not* about a relationship between two terms; rather desire is a productive force (Deleuze & Guattari, 1984). A productive force that is in fact all of life (Deleuze & Guattari, 1984).

Making this claim they go on to affirm that "the truth of the matter is that social production is purely and simply desiring-production itself under determinate conditions...[consequently] there is only desire and the social and nothing else" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1984, p.29). Desire is the driving force of all life and it is a force that "animates all the processes of material production" (Bignall, 2008, p.139). Furthermore, these are processes that are fully contained

within life itself, not a bounded life or self: “but all life, organic and inorganic” (Davies, 2010, p.55).

Desire then is nothing more than the flow of forces that are at work everywhere “functioning smoothly at times and at other times in fits and starts” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1984, p.1). Moreover, this is a flow of forces that is simultaneously set free yet also restrained by social institutions, individuals and representations (Holland, 2005). Consequently, desiring-production becomes nothing less than a site of struggle (Patton, 2000). Yet, within this struggle desire itself remains focused on the “proliferation of desire” (Bignall, 2008, p.138). In this regard desire can be thought of as the ethical compliment to Foucault’s theory of power and resistance, with desire being primary and power being a product of desire (Bignall, 2008).

A Deleuzian desire offers a means to understand the importance of beginning with the micro-politics of the lives of those involved in a PAR project. Deleuze himself stresses this point by claiming that to begin with the macro overlooks the micro (Deleuze & Guattari, 1984). Rather, the focus must remain on “the small elements that comprise our political lives” (May, 2005, p.127). This is the politics of PAR; a micro-politics that is concerned with a micro-political analysis followed by a micro-political intervention (May, 1991); a micro-politics that is about emancipation; or more poignantly - about revolution. I make this claim drawing on Deleuze who states that desire is revolutionary; “desire doesn’t want revolution, it is revolutionary by itself and as though involuntary, in wanting what it wants” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1984, p.126-127). So whilst Action Research and PAR have spoken of its revolutionary potential for oppressed groups to overcome some higher power (eg: Carr, Kemmis, 1986; Freire, 2000; Kemmis, 2008) Deleuze’s desire offers a means whereby PAR can begin to focus on the micro as opposed to the macro, making revolutionary action possible in a Deleuzian specific sense.

## Bringing Desire to the Analysis

Data analysis was conducted simultaneously with data collection as this PAR project proceeded. In analysing of the data I took seriously McIntyre's advice; it is the responsibility of the researcher to "take seriously the realities of "what is" for local actors in PAR projects" (McIntyre, 2008, p.13). The realities of "what [was]" for these three early childhood teachers entered this project from our very first meeting (McIntyre, 2008, p.13). These realities entered by way of a discussion about the work they were about to participate in and how they saw this affecting their positioning within the school. More specifically these realities were captured with the arrival of an "*invisible barrier*":

Director: ...without any disrespect to any teaching staff within the school. But it's taken a long time for me to get to a place working in this room where I have felt a sense of - I guess - respect for the work that we do.

ECT 2: I don't know. It's almost like an invisible barrier...I think that there is an invisible barrier even perhaps in the parent's minds, perhaps to a certain extent even in the children's minds. That there's this Nirvana. That is school.

ECT 3: ...I think traditionally in early childhood, and especially in a school setting, you know it's like, ...we were considered the early childhood teachers, we were considered, we weren't really the real teachers...you're not real teachers. You're not the real teachers, they're the real teachers.

Reading this "*invisible barrier*" through the work of a Deleuzian desire, the "flow of force" is evident. First, tensions were being expressed that evidently existed between these three early childhood teachers and their primary teacher counterparts. Tensions that seemed to be contributing to the Director sharing her sense of having finally reached a point where a certain degree of respect for the work and learning taking place in this Early Childhood Centre had finally been achieved. Second, this flow of forces evidently reached even further and extended to the parents and the children. This was an extension that resulted in the expression of school as being some sort of "*Nirvana*" compared to early childhood. Finally, this flow of forces

appeared to have worked towards producing three early childhood teachers who sensed that maybe they were “*not real*” teachers compared to their primary teacher counterparts.

As the researcher in this conversation I became positioned as a “*link*” between two different worlds - the Early Childhood Centre and the rest of the school:

Director: And for me; I’m really passionate about that, you know; that we do have that connectedness to the school and that there is some continuity... I’m really happy that you can be a link between this world (point to the Early Childhood Centre where this meeting was taking place) and that world (point to the door that connects the Early Childhood Centre with the rest of the school).

Encountering this positioning as a “*link*” was challenging. It was a challenge that produced a state of intensity in me: I was not prepared to be a “*link*”. I questioned if this was part of my role as the researcher who also happened to be a teacher in this school; a teacher who in fact belonged more in “*that world*” than “*this world*”. However, it was in this state of intensity that I began to engage with this Deleuzian desire. A desire that is said to produce “*real connections, investments and intensive states within and between bodies*” (Patton, 2000, p.70). I was “*incited*” and “*provoked*” as I struggled to know what to do having been positioned as a “*link*” (Deleuze, 1988, p.71). I also did not know what to do with this “*invisible barrier*” that had entered this PAR project when rationally I could not rationalize its connection with the planned learning to incorporate Learning Stories into the current practices of the Early Childhood Centre.

It was in this state of intensity that I discovered that Deleuzian desire breaks open linear understandings of learning. A Deleuzian desire is nothing more than the flow of forces, it “*mediates*” a type of thinking that Deleuze argues takes place in-between the chaos of chance affective happenings with their “*ever shifting origins and outcomes*” and the “*structured orderly thinking*” in which we tend to



habitually engage (Stagoll, 2005, p.204). As such, this is a type of thinking that represents an “outside of thought”: that which we do not yet know or cannot represent (Colebrook, 2002a; Stagoll, 2005).

Colebrook (2002a) explains this idea succinctly by clarifying that what we have created is an inside of thought – or a plane of transcendence – where we produce a world that we claim to know. What is required to break free of this inside of thought is an affirmation of life as purely a flow of forces that are in a continual process of becoming (Deleuze & Guattari, 1984). But without this affirmation what tends to take place is a blocking of this flow of forces. The key to breaking open this production then is to permit desire to do its work by not restricting its creative potential.

Resisting my habitual tendency to restrict this state of intensity that had entered the learning in this PAR project I slowly came to realise that despite all my attempts to guide this PAR project along its rationally planned cycles something else was taking place; something that none of us knew nor could represent; something that just seemed to persist in states of intensity that continued to enter our meetings.

To illustrate this continual state of intensity I draw on a piece of data from Meeting 6. I do so to highlight how these states of intensities, brought about by this pure flow of forces, can increase a body’s capacity to affect and be affected and thereby also increase opportunities for bodies to connect in new and unpredictable ways. To set a context for this data it is important to reiterate that there had been a decision by the school leadership to enter into a certification process to become a Mindful School with The Institute of Habits of Mind (The Institute of Habits of Mind., 2009). Whilst the process itself was focused on the formal school years, the Director of the Early Learning Centre had made a decision in Meeting 2 that they should also take up the use of the language as prescribed by The Institute of Habits of Mind

and incorporate it into their Learning Stories. The other two early childhood teachers had not passively taken up this decision. Tensions existed around the use of this language and its suitability. These tensions were permitted to persist throughout the life of this PAR project, continually introducing new intensities into their learning: new intensities that arrived in Meeting 6 by way of "*George Orwell's '1984'*":

ECT2: But when you take on something like this and especially like Habits of Mind, when you take it on it's very important that it works for you. Like, that was... that reading was about. That Mindful School and what does a Mindful School look like? And that's what sent alarm bells off in my head because they said the words were up there on the wall. The people used the language, they were, you know. And in your mind you don't want it to be, but you imagine '1984' George Orwell. And you know, everybody thinks the same and everybody does the same. And it's, that's not how it is! It's too prescriptive!

Director: No it's not!

ECT2: No! To think that a school in Hawaii, or a school, or a PYP school in wherever in the world - an IBO school, or any of these schools, Reggio up the road, is going to be the same. It's not! And it can never be!

Dissensus is the overarching theme in this dialogue. The language of The Institute of Habits of Mind was likened to "*George Orwell's '1984'*" and alarm bells were ringing because everyone thinks the same and does the same. This passionate likening brought out the "*No it's not!*" which was then followed with a further passionate "*No!*" as this language was rejected. Such passionate cries highlighting the dissensus that was affecting and being affected by the bodies present by way of intensities that Deleuze says is critical if we are to permit desire to do its work; that is to leave behind prior representations and continually begin again as we move towards the unknown. Such a move was made possible in this dialogue as it continued. It was made possible because consensus was not sought; rather differences were verbalized whereby the dialogue became a continuum of intensities that were working towards something that was not yet known. What this "not yet known" was did not begin to emerge until Meeting 7.

Meeting 7 took place mid-way through first term of the new school year. I was no longer a teacher at this school and therefore I re-entered this school as the researcher who was once also a teacher and colleague. A significant shift in my positioning within this project had taken place. But there was also a further shift that had taken place conceptually. My anxieties over the direction of this project, or more poignantly, what I had perceived as a lack of direction or inability to remain focused on the planned cycles had faded. My ongoing engagement with the work of Deleuze in combination with the data analysis was in fact doing its own work on my thinking. My previous outcry to my supervisors "*But I'm not doing Action Research*" no longer played on my mind. Instead my researcher self had become immersed in a type of thinking that had opened up to perceiving and engaging with the "very difference from which any world emerges" (Colebrook, 2002a, p.77). I can only liken this to a type of thinking that Olsson (2009) says is about embracing a form of thinking that proceeds by laying out its ground at the same time that it thinks, and in this thinking, also continually disrupts the ground it has laid out. In this act I came to know that something else was going on in this PAR project that had to be permitted to emerge. Something that was taking place by way of a form of thought was entering from the middle – not via the pre-given images and representations that both these three early childhood teachers and I had already produced. This something entered at the commencement of this meeting by way of "*hard work*":

Director: A lot of the words still resonate with me but I think I'm probably in terms of team leader I am in a different space than I was back then. And a lot of what I reflected on at the time was... I was unsettled, well not unsettled but I was like: "how do I respect everyone in this space?" But a lot of what I said also still, my feelings about teaching and about the school are still very much, umm, yeah, there's issues in that area now. Yeah, I still feel that administration support, well, still feel a part of the administration support but I'm questioning other stuff about yeah...It's hard work!

This “*hard work*” was making visible the “differential forces” of desire that are said to be always at work folding, unfolding and refolding any ground that we may lay out before us (Colebrook, 2002a). Evident also was the manner in which thought will, more often than not, exceed what a thinking subject can perceive: a thinking subject that can only perceive it as “*hard work*” (Pratt, 2009). It is therefore a type of thinking that is saturated with the forces of desire moving this early childhood teacher into a space where it is nothing but a space of affect: a space where desire is able to release its fully productive potential to unlock thinking and open it up to a space whereby the new and the creative can come about (Pratt, 2009).

Moreover, this dialogue illuminates the fact that the forces of desire are both simultaneously set free yet also restrained within the assemblages in which it is located. This is important for as Deleuze illustrates desire is always produced in an assemblage: assemblages that produce intensities, particles of affect and a-signifying signs; subjectivity is also a product of this process (Patton, 2000). This is why desire can be thought of as the ethical compliment to Foucault’s theory of power and resistance. Critical here though is desire’s position in its relationship with power and subjectivity. Desire is not simply opposed to power; rather desire is already co-implicated in power (Bignall, 2008). For it is desiring-production which produces both the grid-like structures that stratify bodies and produce subjectivities as well as the more supple arrangements of bodies that permit a form of thinking that can enter from the middle and thus allow the new and the creative to emerge.

This PAR project was in fact doing just this: it was permitting a more supple arrangement of bodies thereby allowing thought to enter from the middle. Whilst all along there had been work going on in the three teachers’ planned aim to explore Learning Stories, other issues had been permitted to reside in this space:

- There had been the “invisible barrier” between them and their primary teacher counterparts;
- There had also been ongoing conflict over the use of the language of The Institute of Habits of Mind; and
- There was the emergence of this “hard work”.

It was this “*hard work*” that that set in motion a desire within these three early childhood teachers to make themselves and their Centre more visible within the school.

The Director has already been attempting to raise the profile of the Early Childhood Centre from the commencement of this new school year by introducing the use of Learning Stories as a tool for assessment to her primary teacher counterparts. This move however, had been perceived as a threat. The Director had recently been told by one of her primary teacher counterparts that she must “*stop doing a good job as [you] are making us [her primary teacher counterparts] look bad*”. This confrontation confirmed that desire, with its flow of forces and states of intensities, produces both grids of power and subjectivity as well as the smooth spaces where thought can enter from the middle.

The production of subjectivity is evident in this “*hard work*” and it came through poignantly in the pursuing dialogue. All three of these early childhood teachers began to question the role of early childhood in this independent school; “*I’m still conflicted where we fit in the bigger picture*”, “*The barrier is still there, it is palpable*”. This had now become a space that was infused with the forces of desire and all that existed was a series of problems with no known solution. Yet it was in this space that the desire to rupture this invisible barrier finally emerged.

It emerged by way of these three early childhood teachers conceptualizing the idea of introducing Parent Nights: they conceived of an on-going dialogue with their parents in the form of focus group discussions each term. This, they decided, was a political move: provide the parents with a

voice in the Early Childhood Centre and their own voices will also be heard with greater clarity out in the school. However, this was not a rationally planned decision; rather it just arrived. It was thought that entered from the middle. Its arrival was captured succinctly in the words of one of these early childhood teachers at the end of our meeting when she expressed what this night meant to her:

ECT2: This has always been my dream though... Is to have these parent nights when it's not just talking at them.

ECT3: Well your dream is going to come true.

ECT2: Well they do come true, don't they? But I feel really strongly about that... You know it may never change anything but just the fact to be seen, to be visible, to give our parents a voice that they may also ask for this when they go into the school. It makes us visible. So just to be heard is important.

A dream that comes true? Or the work of desire that has been permitted to activate a movement that set in motion thought that could enter the middle? This is the movement that releases desire from habitual thought and makes possible a movement into the in-between spaces. A movement that has permitted a rupturing of habitual tendencies to allow thought to break free of the boundaries and structures that had been producing them as early childhood teachers in this school. Moreover, this is a movement that was privileged in all of the tensions and conflicts of this PAR project whereby these early childhood teachers could engage with the micro-politics of this independent school and produce an outcome that was revolutionary. Thus, this is the Deleuzian desire that "doesn't 'want' revolution, it is revolutionary by itself and as though involuntary, in wanting what it wants" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1984, p.126-127).

## **A Deleuzian framework for PAR**

It is at this point that I introduce the Deleuzian framework for PAR that emerged from this long engagement with PAR and a Deleuzian desire. In introducing this framework I pay tribute to Drummond and Themessl-Huber (2007). Their

paper acted as a provocation of my own contemplations on how I could somehow represent my thinking on my analysis of this PAR project. This was a provocation that both excited me yet also provoked further questions; questions that were connected to Drummond and Themessl-Huber's (2007) conceptualisation of a Deleuzian "becoming". Specifically, my questioning was not centered on their claim that Deleuze's conceptual tools offer possibilities for enriching PAR; but rather it was their mobilisation of what they were calling a "reciprocal dialectic of continuous becoming" (Drummond & Themessl-Huber, 2007, p. 444).

I will briefly elaborate on what I saw as a tension in mobilizing a "dialectical" relationship when speaking of a Deleuzian becoming. The philosophy of Deleuze is a philosophy that vigorously critiqued the history of philosophy and was deeply concerned with the "art of forming, inventing, and fabricating concepts" that always remained totally singular (Stivale, 1991, p.4). Individuals enter into "continuous [processes] of re-singularization [through which] they must become at once solidary<sup>2</sup> and increasingly different" (Stivale, 1991, p.4). To enter into this process of creating, by becoming "increasingly different", demands a form of creating that will compromise and disturb anything that had come prior to it including the creation of something that may "sometimes [be] barbarous or shocking" (Stivale, 1991, p.4). Consequently, this is a form of creating that cannot enter into a dialectical relationship which in itself is about remaining with prior representations; rather it must enter into a process of a Deleuzian becoming (Stivale, 1991).

For Deleuze, "becoming" - or what he also terms a "politics of becoming" - is a micro-politics about a continual process of new beginnings rather than a process of negation. It is a micro-politics that is infused with the forces of desire and

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<sup>2</sup> "Solidary" Fr: solidarity

recognises desire's implication in the production of the material world. It is a politics of becoming with its continual processes of creation of the new and refusal of fixed notions of being. Deleuze achieves this by moving beyond identity politics that define being by way of processes of negation that he argues reduces the capacity for particular modes of being and interacting, to a politics that is only interested in what a body can do; not what a body is (Hickey-Moody & Malins, 2007). So in asking the question; 'what can a body do?' Deleuze simultaneously sets about dismantling identity politics that mobilise categories, to identify groups that mobilise political purposes (Hickey-Moody & Malins, 2007). He does so by calling for a "politics of becoming" that is a politics unlike the dialectic which negates difference; rather it is a politics that is purely positive (Colebrook, 2002a; Hickey-Moody & Malins, 2007).

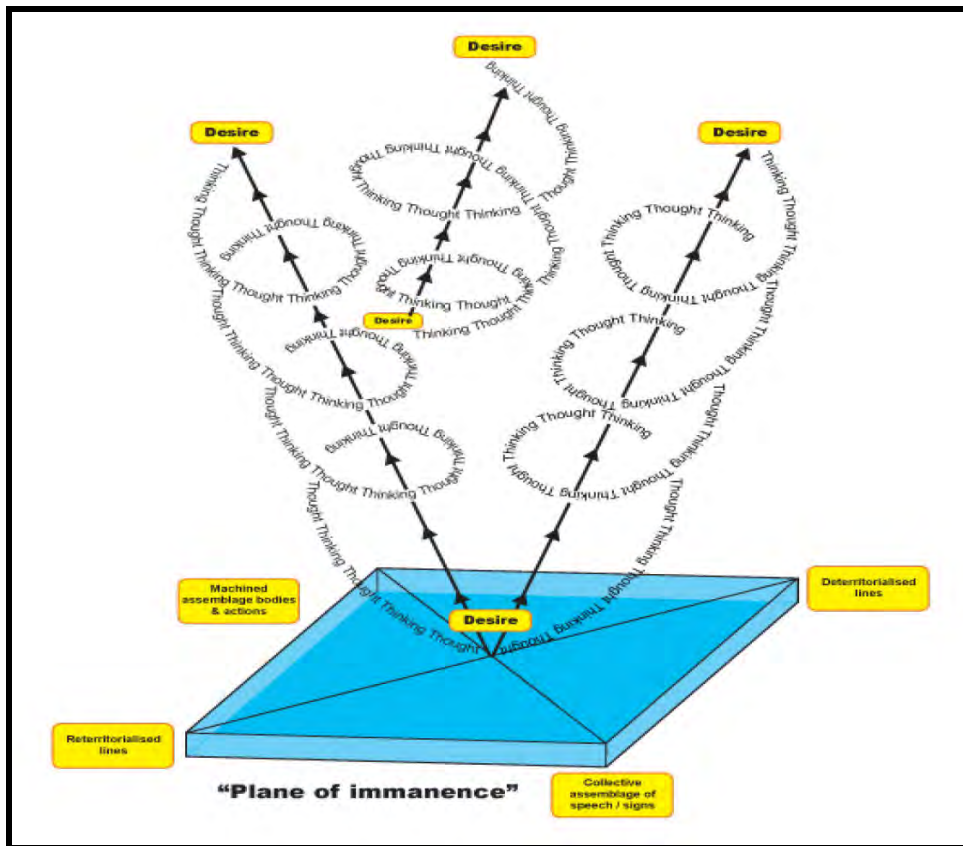
Colebrook captures this succinctly by stating that this "non-dialectical or positive becoming...has a different political orientation" that "[frees] us from fixed images by indicating the flow of history from which we have emerged; it presents the creative flow of time as becoming or the opening to the future" (Colebrook, 2002a, p.50).

Engaging with this tension in Drummond and Themessl-Huber's paper I worked towards the opening up of this "dialectical" becoming to a Deleuzian becoming whereby I began to see the possibilities of thinking PAR anew with a Deleuzian desire as its driving force.

I now introduce my Deleuzian framework for PAR (see Figure One).



Figure One: A Deleuzian Framework for Participatory Action Research



At the base of this framework is the “plane of immanence” that has been described as an “expression of Deleuze’s model of thought” (Hickey-Moody & Malins, 2007, p.21). It is thus a “place” upon which to “mediate” the type of thinking that Deleuze argues takes place in the “in-between” - in-between the structured orderly thinking that we habitually engage in and the chance affective happenings that hold the potential for something new to come about (Stagoll, 2005, p.204). As Stagoll explains, the plane of immanence can be thought of as a “surface upon which all events occur, where events are understood as chance, productive interactions between forces of all kinds” (Stagoll, 2005, p.204). Consequently, it represents the field of becoming: an outside of thought.

As this plane of immanence is the “surface upon which all events occur” the second aspect of this framework is the

recognition that desire is the force that produces the very materiality of our social worlds. Desire is always produced in an assemblage of bodies that in turn, produce intensities, affects and a-signifying signs whereby subjectivity and power is a product (Patton, 2000). As Deleuze explains, desire is assembled by way of two axes:

- Machined desire which is the material processes of bodies and actions and the collective assemblage of enunciations concerning signs and speech; and
- The deterritorialising and reterritorialising lines that work to either restrict and stratify social space or set about the creation of a smooth space whereby thought can enter the “in-between” (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004).

The two lines running across the base of the framework represent these two axes.

The spirals of thought-thinking arise from this base with desire running through the middle of these spirals. These spirals are a representation of Deleuze’s theorisation of thought where thought is always about beginning again as opposed to remaining with what has already been. It is thought-thinking that demands an engagement with ways of acting that increases a body’s capacity to affect and to be affected by increasing opportunities for bodies to connect in new and unpredictable ways. For this to happen desire must be released to do its work: to engage with the micropolitics of the lives of those involved in a PAR project. In this engagement one must seek out a micropolitical intervention that is about emancipation; or more poignantly that is about revolution in a Deleuzian specific sense (Deleuze & Guattari, 1984).

## Conclusion

In presenting a PAR project in which a Deleuzian desire was brought to the analysis of data I have illustrated the potential that this desire can have in a PAR project. As the analysis

illuminated, the micropolitics of the lives of three early childhood teachers remained central in this project. The micropolitics included an “invisible barrier”, “George Orwell’s ‘1984’” and “hard work”. These micropolitics were desiring-production at work in this social space called an Early Childhood Centre located in an independent school. But more importantly it was a micro-politics that permitted thought to enter from the middle where these three early childhood teachers conceptualised a parent night whereby they themselves were able to rupture the invisible barrier that they all sensed. The end result was the creation of something new that was emancipatory and revolutionary in a Deleuzian sense. This would not have happened if as a group we refused these micro-political realities to enter the space of this PAR project.

Engaging with PAR as a researcher my concern was with the materiality of the lives of these three early childhood teachers. This must be central in any PAR project. To bring the philosophy of Deleuze to PAR can only be a productive move. This is because it is a philosophy that posits reality as that which consists in a field of material processes. Material processes are a flow of forces that fold, unfold and refold actual things, thoughts and sensations to the pure intensities of this flow of forces. The revolutionary political process within this pure flow of forces is desiring-production itself. As Deleuze and Guattari explain “despite what certain revolutionaries think, desire is in its essence revolutionary” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1984, p.126). Deleuze’s philosophy offers new ways of understanding this revolutionary potential; new ways that recognise the importance of beginning with the micro rather than the macro.

Why is this important when thinking about future praxis for PAR? To remain focused on the “grand scheme” of things only results in the overlooking of “the small elements” that comprise the political lives of those involved in any PAR project (May, 2005, p.127). However, when a Deleuzian

desire is positioned as the driving force in a PAR project the only possibility is for the micropolitics of the lives of those involved to be positioned as central: in this positioning desire can be released to set in motion its truly revolutionary potential.

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