

Practitioner Knowledge and Evidence-based Research, Policy and Practice

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Current political imperatives for evidence-based practice in work with young people privileges externally produced knowledge over that which practitioners derive from and apply in their work settings. The practice/research relationship and its outcomes could be enhanced through critical reflection on the dynamics of the personal, professional and political aspects of practice both for researchers and 'face-to-face' service providers. This would provide opportunities for the joint creation of knowledge that is transformative,

Keywords: *critical reflection; research; evidence based policy and practice.*

More than twenty years ago Donald Schön (1983) argued for a new approach to the development of professional knowledge by focusing on practitioners' reflection on experience, rather than relying on the imposition of external knowledge. The current vogue for evidence-based practice in educational, health and welfare services once again puts the experience of fieldworkers at centre stage, but implies that the quality of interventions have to be evaluated and verified through external research (Solebury, 2001; Catan, 2002; Fox, 2003). Whilst having evidence to support practice would appear to be non-controversial and the potential for 'objectivity' and 'transparency' desirable, this article argues that prevailing modes of evidence-gathering privileges particular types of researcher knowledge and this serves to silence the practitioner voice. We revisit Schön's work, advocating a reframing as critical reflective practice with the aim of promoting a shared endeavour for professional fieldworkers and researchers to give voice to the practitioner evidence base.

Communicating practice: problems with external verification

Face to face practice, by its very nature is not concerned primarily with gathering evidence and creating meaning, but rather with personal and social change. Within relationship-based occupations, and particularly within youth work in which the voluntary participation of young people is central, communicating the apparently mundane and everyday nature of practice has not historically had a high priority:

What hope would a club leader have of securing funds who stated, 'last year my boys learned nothing except how not to cheat at games quite so often, to wash their hands

occasionally, to take their caps off in the club, and to enjoy being together'? (Brew, 1943: 49-50)

Moreover, there are aspects of the relational elements of practice which necessarily take place in the realm of the interpersonal, extending beyond the organisation:

The relationships that young people make with each other in a youth project are just as important as the relationship they make with a worker (Robertson, 2004:78)

The interpersonal takes great skill to communicate if it is not to be misunderstood and is almost impossible to quantify. Consequently, there have often been silences in practitioner accounts of their work around those very elements which are at its heart.

In the contemporary climate, it has been suggested that

The language of both accreditation and so-called smart outcomes (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, timed) with their promises of measurable and completed results, seems to have robbed youth work of its ability to express and explain itself on its own terms and in its own more subtle vocabulary (Brent, 2004:69).

Failure effectively to communicate the importance of what might appear mundane or subjective in informal educational work with young people has sometimes led to distortions in public perceptions of the nature of the work, unease about the public accountability of such practice and tension between policy intentions and practice realities.

The knowledge generated within the people professions has always been informed by theory and empirical evidence: without this, such work could lay no claim to professional status. However, professional practice also includes a knowing which springs from the experience of everyday interventions and association with service-users. Although there have been some excellent efforts in recent years to give voice to the meanings of practice from professional worker perspectives, (see for example Brent, 2002, 2004) such 'knowing' is not readily accommodated by the standard approaches of research and evaluation. The complex and subtle understanding of practice derived from the interpretation of experience over time (Spence, 2004) often eludes evaluation through externally designed research methodologies which seek to establish general and universal criteria for measuring 'quality' for purposes of public accountability. Nevertheless, significant policy decisions, which set the terms within which practice must proceed, are made with persistent reference to 'evidence' derived from such research and evaluation:

There's an obsession with evidence-based policy...if Number 10 says bloody evidence-based policy to me once more, I'm going to deck someone and probably get unemployed. (Louise Casey, Director of Anti Social Behaviour Unit, quoted BBC News, 6th July 2005, 1.00pm).

Casey's outburst during an after-dinner speech implicitly assumes the value of knowledge which is not 'evidence-based'. Her frustration arises in a climate where such knowing is not acknowledged and where criticism of policy in terms which do not fit the evidence-base

as defined by government, is foreclosed. In this scenario, narratives encapsulating the full range of practitioner knowledge, which are not embraced by this prevailing 'evidence-based' approach, are undervalued.

The invisibility of the experiential knowledge of practitioners has been addressed theoretically with reference to problems of subjectivity, power and equality in the research relationship. In this regard, ideas about praxis, process, and reflective action have been explored in relation to validating and accessing practice knowledge (eg. Everitt et al, 1992; McNiff, 1994). Within the professions, Schön's concept of 'reflective practice' (1983) has been seminal in illustrating the significance of 'insider' knowledge in problem solving. Despite such ongoing theoretical debates and the impact of *The Reflective Practitioner* within people-oriented professions, the evidence-base voiced by external researchers and evaluators prevails, fueling anxieties about the nature and quality of the substantive practice of professional workers:

How do you measure the impact it has on young people? A lot of the time it's hard outputs in terms of crime statistics, health stats and stuff. Whereas a lot of the time when we work with young people it's going to be on a preventative level and it's going to be longer term. You're not going to see the outcomes. So it's quite difficult in terms of how we describe youth work and the impact youth work has on young people's lives. (Youth worker, group discussion, Durham University, 2005)

Practice can seldom fully recognise itself in the 'evidence' drawn from research (Fox, 2003). Consequently practitioners struggle to adjust to the assumptions and imperatives of policy makers who call upon such evidence to justify their decisions. Within the framework and systems for practice which result, the experiential knowledge of practitioners is further down-graded, and practice discourse further displaced, adding to a cycle of control and anxiety which provokes demands for ever more externally evaluated evidence of 'quality'. This is one aspect of the de-professionalisation which currently affects all the human service professions. It is particularly problematic within youth work which has never fully established its professional credentials and where 'evidence' might be seen as a means of clarifying professional status:

S. There needs to be some evaluation. It's back to...being professional and not being seen as professionals, being able to say what we do and saying, 'This is what we do. Here's some evidence'.

Notably this worker goes on to say:

...It doesn't have to be playing the game in terms of 'bums on seats'. But it has to be something. (Youth worker, group discussion. Durham University, 2005)

As evidence based policy and practice regarding 'what works' have become the watchwords within managerialist agendas for engagement and action designed to achieve concrete 'outcomes', face-to-face workers are structurally disadvantaged by the underdevelopment or silencing of coherent discourses relating to the knowledge which comes from fieldwork experience. Professional practitioners are often treated by researchers as 'gatekeepers', providing access to users, rather than as agentic partners or producers of meaning in their

own right. Simultaneously, regular evaluations of their work assume deficiency in their practice. Evaluation is presented as the means whereby workers can learn how to improve the efficiency of 'service delivery' to participating user groups and through which policy makers can expect accountability. Insofar as aspects of practice knowledge are not included within the discursive frameworks of research, the resulting evidence may be of limited value in the field. Worse, when such partial understanding informs policy, it may lead to distorted priorities and deskilling in practice, the very antithesis of what *The Reflective Practitioner* seek to achieve.

Theory and practice

The notion of reflective practice developed by Donald Schön (1983; 1992) has been influential in framing approaches to community and youth work education and practice (Smith, 1994; Bamber, 1998; Bessant, 2004). Schön observed a crisis of public trust in the ability of professionals to solve problems in areas where they claimed expertise. He argued that an over-reliance on positivist epistemology (which has again come to the fore in gathering evidence about practice), represented the 'academic high ground' and contributed to this crisis, separating theory from its application. In this paradigm, theorising is an activity discrete from the ongoing, daily, difficulties and challenges of the 'swampy lowlands' of practice. Its dominance leads to the imposition of technically rational solutions to practice problems (Schön, 1992: 54). Professional problem-solving thereby becomes an 'objective' enterprise to be prosecuted by an expert elite. This fails to incorporate significant subjective pressures or to utilise the active engagement and experiential knowledge of the practitioner.

Schön's ideas were formulated at a time when counter-professionals were becoming increasingly vocal in their critique of what had come to stand for professional expertise. Whilst acknowledging their insights, Schön was concerned that radical ideologies might themselves become a new elitist orthodoxy. Pursuing a more fluid understanding of professional knowing, he argued that this should include the capacity to deal with 'indeterminate zones of practice – the situations of complexity and uncertainty, the unique cases that require artistry, the elusive task of problem setting, the multiplicity of professional identities...' (Schön, 1992: 51). These require on-the-spot action and reaction to non-routine situations which are beyond the scope of technical rationality.

For Schön, professional knowing requires practitioners to access their tacit understanding in order both to identify (set) and solve problems. Utilising his observations in various occupations, he sought to systematise professional engagement, celebrating in his analysis the possibilities of 'reflection-in-action' (during an event) and 'reflection-on-action' (after an event had taken place). Through his version of reflection, practitioners could access hidden knowledge that otherwise would not be available to them. For Schön, 'reflection-in-action' enshrined a new epistemology of practice, applicable across a wide range of disciplines (Schön, 1983). It is not surprising that reflective practice has been widely taken up within the people-centred professions such as teaching, social work, nursing and youth and community work as it resonates with the conditions of face-to-face work already described (Eraut, 1995; Palmer et al., 1994; Yelloly and Henkel, 1995).

Schön's epistemology of practice has been subject to criticism, not the least being that

'reflection' is an imprecise method (summarised in Issitt, 2003). His focus on practitioner performance also has limitations akin to the technicism he attacked, missing the potential for reflection to be a transformative or transgressive learning activity, addressing the wider, moral and political issues that impact on users, professional organisations and individual practitioners (Mezirow, 1981).

Nevertheless, reflective practice has been adopted as an accessible and meaningful concept to help communicate, critically evaluate and theorise practice knowledge (Bamber, 1998; Issitt, 1999, 2000; Woods, 2001). In particular, reflective practice counters the downgrading of critical analysis which has resulted from the emphasis on 'performance' and 'delivery' in the framing of professional practice as occupational competence (Bessant, 2004). Yet reflective practice on its own has been insufficient to withstand the political demand for empirical evidence derived from externally validated research and evaluation. Practitioner knowledge remains low down the hierarchy of valid data.

The nature of the divisions between theory and practice shift according to the political climate. Schön attempted to provide a theoretical rationale for systematising professional understanding which countered the limitations of positivism within professional practice. The contemporary focus encompasses an implicit criticism of theory-making in general, based upon a perceived gap between theoretical research and the informational needs of the 'real' worlds of policy and practice. To justify funding for its activities research practice is now required to be relevant to policy-making, and to professional practice as the delivery-arm of policy (Catan, 2002). This forces apart critical, value-based scholarship, reflective practice and research processes.

Practice and the academy

Within debates about the relevance of sociological research, it has been suggested that social scientists might usefully adopt Aristotle's notion of *phronesis* in order to integrate values and practical questions (Flyvbjerg, 2001). *Phronesis* assumes the possibility of taking a principled position, 'a moral disposition to act truly and rightly' (Smith, 1994:164). The adoption of such an idea might contribute to a reflexive approach amongst researchers which would more fully sensitise them to the subtleties of practitioner knowing. However, such a position is not encouraged in a climate in which scholarship, research, and professional practice are physically and intellectually disaggregated. Instead of encouraging *phronesis*, the research and evaluation market undermines the connection between values and action. This is signified by the separation of theory, research and teaching within universities. In the market for gathering 'evidence', values and scholarship are not required. Meanwhile teaching, the experience of which might aid the reflexive processes and practice understanding of researchers, is denigrated as mere technical 'practice'.

Yet within research communities there have been robust debates about the principles and appropriateness of methodology for the purposes and values of inquiry which suggest a commitment to *phronesis*. This includes the possibility of user participation, of making practitioner knowledge visible and of producing research that supports practice contexts. Such approaches are often written into research applications and set as criteria for funding, but the

ideals are seldom fully realised. A climate of short term funding arrangements for research and for professional practice, characterised by professional segregation and employment insecurity, can hardly facilitate the precondition of fruitful and open dialogues over time. Moreover, the implementation of such ideals is inherently threatening. Integrating research and practice would undermine the currently lucrative market for researchers and evaluators. Meanwhile, a comprehensive orientation towards the articulation of practice knowledge may lead to methodologies that are challenging and 'disruptive', flying in the face of current political demands for 'evidence' as a measure of the 'value for money' of professional outcomes (Edwards, 2002; Fox, 2003; Smith and Hodgkinson, 2002).

Political questioning of the value of social science theory is informed by issues of power and control rather than questions of *phronesis*. Critics such as David Blunkett (cited in Kingston, 2003) and Chris Woodhead (1998) display an interest in the production of evidence for particular kinds of practice, creating a new form of 'crisis' in the relationship between theory and research practice in which research which does not directly serve policy imperatives or address problems relating to the policy priorities is defined as deficient. The conditions of intellectual work have become more tightly controlled, encouraging instrumentalism within the academy (Gorard, 2002). Competition, rigid timetables and pre-determined criteria for the assessment of outcomes characterise the terms of research contracts, are apparent within the functions of the Research Assessment Exercise and inform the processes of the research councils, delineating the conditions under which the social sciences might survive as publicly funded disciplines (Solebury, 2001). Research is required to generate politically 'useful' information.

Many researchers who have worked on consultancies, contract research and evaluation studies will have experienced the pressure, subtle and not so subtle, put upon them to produce results in accord with some pre-determined plan. It is as though 'research' is being conducted to find evidence for an already existing agenda. (Gorard, 2002: 5)

Politicians have cynically used research 'evidence' to promote the particular positions they are taking. Thus the spectacle of Margaret Hodge citing research which suggested that youth clubs were of little value (Hodge, 2005), despite the availability of more recent available evidence to the contrary commissioned by her own department (Merton et al, 2004). Such cynicism is not lost upon those in the research and evaluation field who maintain their positions and pursue academic careers by accessing research income and consultancy without any value-based criticism of the terms in which it is framed and without reference to whether or not the 'evidence' gained will add to the understanding of workers and to the quality of their interventions with user groups.

A particular matrix of relations of power and control between the academy, policy makers, funders and practitioners is inscribed within the current fashion for 'evidence-based policy and practice' which has become central to government thinking. Financial stringency ensures that ultimately, research is mobilised in the service of managerialist agendas for 'efficiency' and 'value for money' in the public sector. In youth work, which has long been resource-poor, the situation is further complicated by private finance in the voluntary sector. Much 'research' is commissioned as an in-built requirement of funding for short term projects. The motivation for such a requirement cannot be towards the development of 'good' practice, but rather to

provide 'evidence' that public and/or private finance has been spent according to the purposes of the sponsors, be they the political needs of current administrations to demonstrate the efficacy of their policies, or the positive promotion of the name of a private company. In this process, evidence is marshalled in order to represent the work according to pre-set demands:

- J: *There's a pressure to report back to funders on lots of their objectives
And there's a game that goes on. I see a game going on. We get young people to tell us
how good we are, and then we tell the funders how good young people think we are...
...I definitely think there's a big game goes on with all this. Reporting back to funders
and evaluating things.*
- K: *There has to be in this big, bad, work we live in. There has to be.*
- J: *It doesn't make it right though.*
- K: *But there has to be some sort of formal system. Because we're a voluntary charity
organisation, we have to probably prove more, that we are worthwhile. Very much
we've always said that we're qualitative work, and that to me is just a face because you
always have to prove your stats at the end of it. So how can you support quality in youth
work when you have to prove it or back it up with statistics? That does not show good
quality youth work. That just shows you are good at creative evaluations.*
- J: *Are you saying that statistics prove quality?*
- K: *No...funders want statistics, they don't want quality.*
- J: *At the end of the day that means there could be loads of organisations out
there...doing loads of damage to young people. And they are reporting back to
funders...Mega statistics to make them look great. So that's OK then? That's the way
it's got to be?*
- K: *No. It's not OK. But it's the way it is. It's a game. (Youth workers, group discussion,
Durham University, 2005)*

Questions which might be generated by intellectual and reflective work within scholarship and fieldwork practice or through dialogue between theoretically informed research and professional practice, become secondary to the pragmatic needs of policy making and marketing. Publications based upon such 'research' seldom have any impact beyond the immediate gratification of the sponsor's needs for data. In these circumstances, dialogue and debate in the research community concerning purposes and methodologies may be dismissed as 'unresolved intellectual turmoil' (Smith and Hodgkinson, 2002:295). Intellectual values, independence and theoretical analysis become luxuries of secondary importance in both universities and professional organisations. Worse, legitimate findings can be distorted (Rosenstock and Lee, 2002) or, if considered unsuitable, simply discarded.

Evidence-based solutions

Research and evaluation, used appropriately, is undoubtedly necessary to inform practice development. Instead, in the public sector it is used to control and focus practice, ostensibly to inspire 'confidence' in professions characterised by a 'crisis of trust' (Tonkiss and Passey, 1999). Policy, research and practice are expected to cohere around mutually agreed questions and problems in order to create an ordered symbiosis between all those concerned with the design and delivery of human services (Solebury, 2001; Pitts, 2003). Critical reflection and debate

find no place within this neat, closed circle.

The assumption of shared values and partnership between policy makers, practitioners and researchers emphasises consent rather than dissent, complementarity rather than difference in approaches to social and organisational questions. Reference to the real relations and divisions between various interest groups is absent (Levitas, 1998). The claim that evidence gathered from within these 'shared' values is spurious but it protects politicians from accusations of ideological bias in policy-making, helps to impose conformity within practice, and disciplines research workers to use 'admissible' methodologies which remove them from the everyday (inter)-subjectivities of service delivery. The demand for 'objectivity' results in the assertion of

a hierarchy of research designs, with meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials at the top and qualitative studies somewhere close to divination (Fox, 2003:85)

Qualitative knowledge advanced by practitioners from a different foundation may be downgraded as mere anecdote, an 'irrational other' in binary opposition to 'the claimed rationality and enlightenment of research evidence' (ibid). In the face of dominant discourses of research methodology, practitioners become either the passive objects of the research or feel forced to 'perform' for its benefit (Draper, 2001).

This trend runs counter to the ideals suggested by Schön's notion of the 'reflective practitioner'. Yet in his later work, Schön himself seems to have endorsed the movement away from practitioners directly researching and transmitting knowledge. On the grounds of objectivity, he advocated a research, policy, practice triad. Endorsing a spatial theory-practice separation, he argued here that knowledge grounded in practice is more effectively articulated by academics undertaking research within the practice situation, or through the removal of the practitioner-researcher from the practice context into a position of neutrality such as a university (Schön and Rein, 1994). The difficulty with this approach is the assumption of neutrality and of equality between each party in the triad. It underestimates the material realities which silence practitioner knowledge.

Displacement of practitioner knowledge contributes to an apparently low take-up of research findings within the professional field. Despite the injunctions of politicians that practice should respond to evidence, and despite the efforts of researchers to include practitioner perspectives and to make their research questions relevant to policy and practice, it is frequently asserted that research findings are having little demonstrable effect:

...there is a concern among researchers in the learning and skills sector that much good work continues to be wasted. It is either ignored by policy makers or fails to reach those at the sharp end: the lecturers, trainers and college managers.

All too often a project commissioned by the government, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) or another agency and paid for out of the public purse, ends up simply gathering dust on the bookshelves of the researchers who carried it out. (Kingston, 2003:46).

Thus the question of dissemination has now become important to research sponsors. Increasingly, in their funding bids, researchers must pay attention to strategies for ensuring

that their findings are communicated effectively to the worlds of policy and practice. For example, the ESRC 'Research Capacity-Building' project included within its brief, 'the creation of new models for transforming findings into usable forms' (Gorard, 2002). This has been further reinforced by the new terms of reference for the Research Assessment Exercise which stresses the dissemination of findings to a range of appropriate audiences (www.rae.ac.uk).

Increasing the awareness and broadening the access of practitioners to useful information and knowledge is important. However, the market led conditions of evidence-production ensure that much research has little to offer. Simultaneously, the top-down thrust of evidence-based approaches fails to recognise that research might be covering questions and issues which are of secondary rather than primary relevance within the world of practice. It is possible that practitioners do not routinely use externally generated research, not because they do not know about it, though this may be partially true, but because research findings tell them what they already 'know', and/or elide the complexity of the knowledge-in-process required for successful practice, and/or fail to engage with the immediacy of 'everyday' processes. Further, practitioners might be refusing research findings as a defence against 'evidence' which is not located within the pressing needs of local contexts, and which only generates anxiety about the validity and quality of their practice interventions.

Practitioner anxiety expresses the realities of the contextual conditions of practice rather than any real loss of quality in understanding and knowledge in the field. The distribution of power in favour of central organisational and political interests has redefined criteria for success in managerialist and financial terms and has co-opted research and evaluation towards these interests. Process-based understanding and questions which might otherwise encourage dialogue amongst practitioners and between practitioners, researchers and policy-makers, have been identified as inefficiencies and problems to be solved. Relationships which were previously implicit and organic have become mechanised, formalised and degraded.

Research and practice: borderlands and partnership

Research and evaluation have traditionally been integral to the people professions. Professional education draws upon the findings of empirical research to explore the context and issues of fieldwork practice. Knowledge of social scientific research methods is included as core learning across the range of professional education and is explicitly required within the professional education of youth workers. Within practice itself, evidence is marshalled as a means of informing local strategy and action, frequently on a daily basis and always interpreting and re-interpreting the meanings of the 'evidence':

I'm thinking of session evaluation. We'll use that to then plan the next session. If something went down rubbish, then you don't use it with that group. But that's not to say you'll never use it again. It all depends on the group dynamics. That might work with another group. (Youth worker, group discussion, Durham University, 2005)

Professional workers do publish 'evidence', often in the form of case studies derived from practice (Draper, 2001; Madden, 2002/3) or in the form of practice 'stories', in attempts to give voice to evidence they regard as important:

We have specific targets that we have to meet in terms of numbers, we have to do it. We just have to do it to have our project going. But we always try to put in individual stories, like the skate park and the dancers, and we try to give funders little stories as well, so we're not just firing figures at them, but we are sort of giving them a bit more personal stuff as well. (Youth worker, group discussion, Durham University, 2005)

As reflective practitioners, concerned to look at and communicate what they are doing, workers also participate in the design and development of significant research projects. For example, the quotations from discussion groups with youth workers used in this article are data from a research project devised by Weston Spirit, a youth organisation working in partnership with Durham University community and youth work programme (Durham University, 2005). Moreover, there has been a tradition of practitioner research which has led to fruitful insights into the realities of practice and influenced generations of practitioners, without the mediation of politicians. This includes the classic detached youth work interventions of Mary Morse (1965) and Goetschius and Tash (1967).

Here the principles of action research, adopting informal educational approaches have been particularly important, enabling practitioner-researchers to reflect upon and change daily practice, promote learning and social change (Hart and Bond, 1995). This approach engages with the question of process in practice, acknowledges the fluidity of the field and takes responsibility for the ongoing impact of research upon the fieldwork situation in a manner which mirrors responsible professional practice. Action research has the potential to shift power from researcher to researched, to constitute the latter as participating subjects (Winter, 1998). It has been influential amongst those who argue that values and purposes, which are open to different meanings and interpretation, are important features both of research processes and of professional practice in educational and welfare settings (Everitt et al. 1992; McNiff, 1994). However, action research can be time consuming and expensive, unsuited to contemporary circumstances. Despite the fact that it remains within the canon of available research methods, often debated and much promoted, it is seldom operationalised in an environment in which short terms 'results', which can give credence to decision-making, are favoured over long term interventions leading to empowering and critical change and development on the ground:

Civil servants don't understand the job that we do, they're not youth workers. They don't tend to be, they don't want to know. They're looking for cost benefit, cost benefit analysis. They're looking at the quick fix. They're looking at short term and they're looking at election time coming up... And they don't understand the process of evaluation. They don't understand it's a long process, you can't sustain billions or millions of numbers doing what you do. It's small, focus based youth work. It takes quite a long time. But they don't understand that. They want to see results. (Youth worker, group discussion, Durham University, 2005)

Within professional practice, feminist research has also been influential (Spence 1996; Issitt, 2000; Francis and Skelton, 2001). Feminism reminds both practitioners and academics of the impact of research upon its subjects, that the subjective engagement of the researcher is inevitably affected by experience of social divisions such as class, race and gender (Ramazanoglu, 1992; Gelsthorpe, 1992), and that 'factors of power and values cannot be

added on afterwards, they are fundamental' (Griffiths, 1995:61). Like action research, this underlines the constructive potential of developmental and educational principles applied within the research encounter and like action research, it is more often discussed than practised, not least because it is capable of raising uncomfortable questions which threaten the complacency of the status quo.

The work of action researchers and feminist intellectuals is frequently multi-disciplinary, problematising epistemological, disciplinary and professional 'borderlands' (Stanley, 1990), which accord with Schön's 'swampy lowlands'. The theoretical and methodological approaches which are most sympathetic to practice inhabit these borderlands in which theory and research, policy and practice interweave and combine with the personal, professional and political. Evidence gained there can make claims to be rigorous, representative and valid and takes seriously the ideas enshrined in concepts of reflective practice and *phronesis* but it is marginalised or dismissed as mere experience when it foregrounds values, purposes, subjectivity and relationships, eschewed by more 'sanitised' research methodologies. It is allowed no claim to the academic high ground of objectivist knowledge, and comes low on the research pecking order described by Fox (2003).

Whilst reflective practice and research-mindedness within professional work seem destined to remain in the 'borderlands' or 'swampy lowlands', political agendas from above reaffirm positivist methodologies as a means of measuring service outcomes and ensuring efficiency (Pitts, 2003). The emphasis on 'partnership' seems to offer a seductive opportunity for the possibility of dynamic interchange between related worlds (Statham, 2000) but it masks an inherently static authoritarianism. Partnerships are not constructed from the motivation towards educational development in practice or with the intention of improving policy in response to practice insights. Instead, they represent an effort to maximise the impact of policy outcomes and efficiency of delivery.

The frequent crossing over the borderlands by academic researchers into the world of 'service delivery' to evaluate and develop knowledge appears to promote shared and integrative perspectives, but the symbolic frontiers between knowledge and experience have become more pronounced. The drive for efficiency and the tightening of managerial control within employing organisations has created a more rigid specialisation and division of labour between practitioner and researcher. The practitioner as researcher has been the victim of deskilling and deprofessionalisation, squeezed out by the nature of contracts in which 'research' and evaluation is an external exercise in support of managerial control. Research is no longer integral to the job descriptions of face to face workers. This leads to a 'stove-piping' of accountability through separate organisational systems. Thus the practitioner is accountable for the service to line managers, while the researcher is accountable for conducting research or evaluation according to the methodology prescribed in the contract. The worst case scenario is that research will have no impact or opportunity to inform evaluated services which end when short-term funding is exhausted and the policy is re-framed or abandoned. It is not surprising that the uptake of research findings by practitioners is patchy (Fox, 2003).

Under such circumstances, contract outcomes carry greater weight than process. There is no necessary connection between research design and action and the values of the practice arena. The values of practice are displaced by abstract codes of research ethics (e.g. BSA,

ud). Though ethical considerations do help to protect researcher and the researched, and are capable of acknowledging the values of the practice situation, they do not take the values of practice as a starting point. To work within professional value systems would be to question objectivist assumptions in research and to risk raising questions which challenge the outcome driven demands of policy.

The values of professional practice in educational and welfare settings are rooted in a human rights perspective. Questions of justice, equality and democracy are transgressive sites for practitioners, users and also for responsible, engaged researchers (Colley, 2003; Edwards, 2002). Such values invoke the possibility of a creative encounter between professional workers and users, which is necessarily open-ended and unpredictable in outcome and which recognises interpersonal subjectivity and informality in the creation of relationships as a necessary aspect of professional intervention. Goals enshrined within 'empowerment' and 'anti-oppressive practice' inevitably open possibilities for professional intervention as an agent of political and social change (Dominelli, 1996). Educational endeavour is intrinsic to such possibilities, presupposing a dialogical subtext, and purposeful communication rather than quantifiable 'service delivery' as the intention of practice.

In principle, sympathetic research processes could offer opportunities otherwise unavailable for participants to meet, reflect and take new courses of action. Equally, the research engagement can go beyond data collection to promote the researcher's own critical reflection and learning (Glaser and Strauss, 1968; Stanley and Wise, 1990; Issitt, 2000). However, it is unlikely that this will be achieved within the narrow, conservative and controlling terms of evidence-based approaches, even if they claim a commitment to 'equal opportunities'.

Practitioner knowledge, visibility and critical reflection

In educational and welfare professions, the practitioner is the vehicle for policy implementation through relationships which are at the centre of a dialectic between personal, professional and political dimensions of practice. Evidence-based research methods linked to policy demands interrupt this dialectic, privileging the externally produced research narrative, excluding or separating the personal and the political from formal discourses. Value based research which seeks to understand fully the relationship between theory and practice, and to accredit reflective practitioner knowledge, would necessarily engage with all elements in a dynamic and interpretive encounter with the practice-in-action. It would capitalise on the creative possibilities of the borderlands between disciplines and recognise the relations of power between the personal, professional and political.

Practitioners require technical knowledge and information to demonstrate competence but practitioner knowledge is more than a series of actions that can be measured by external standards (Hodkinson and Issitt, 1995). It involves a complex but self-conscious process of continuous personal development and learning, inextricably linking structure and agency. Reflection can transcend the mechanistic evaluation of task performance and lead to emancipatory practice (Mezirow, 1985). The dialectics of practice knowledge involve:

- self-consciousness about key personal and professional values;
- sensitivity to a wide range of working relationships including those with co-workers, managers and user groups;
- an explicit analytical understanding of organisational possibilities and indeterminate zones; and
- an ability to negotiate within structures and relations of power, and knowledge about the wider socio-political factors which impact upon practice and within which practice is inscribed.

These aspects of knowledge can, of course, be investigated as discrete entities within evidence-based research, but they need to be mobilised in combination by the engaged and critical practitioner (Brent, 2004). This process defies generalisation because it is context and situation specific whilst at the same time being a series of momentary snapshots of an ongoing developmental and open-ended process. Such knowing-in-action cannot adequately be articulated as externally produced evaluation.

It is difficult for evidence-based research to capture the 'personal' elements of professional practice insofar as this is the most 'risky' and least predictable element of practice, flourishing in Schön's indeterminate zones, which involve notions of tacit understanding and artistry. The self is constantly used in the relational act of engagement with others (Ord, 2004; Spence, 2004). That act can never be reduced to a set of standard procedures:

It's giving them that sort of, love's probably the wrong word to use these days because it's taken far too much out of context, but they do get that to an extent. One of the main things folk need, and it isn't just young folk, it's everybody, they need that certain extent of love and somebody that's really caring for them (Youth worker, group discussion, Durham University, 2005)

There is always an element of practice which is unknowable to the outsider, which is entirely in the person of the practitioner and which practitioners themselves are charged to develop ethically in the process of inter-subjective engagement. The challenge for the dynamic and creative practitioner is to engage in personal reflection, evaluation and development as a necessary aspect of professionalism, and accountability for this process is within their person, as well as through agencies and procedures external to the individual.

The political elements of education and welfare present a problem of a different order, transcending Schön's conceptualisation of reflection. Addressing political dimensions involves attention to issues of power which may themselves be contentious, as well as critical analysis of the social, political and economic context within which practice functions. This invites engagement with external processes of decision making and is beyond the formal terms of professional practice. Political awareness also requires continual review of practitioner values and their synchronicity with, or questioning of, service demands (Issitt, 2003).

A framework for reflection that promotes critical practice triangulates the personal, professional and political. In such a framework, professional workers engage in reflection as a necessary component of critical practice, identifying and addressing limits to professional knowledge within practice as reflexive individuals and through interpersonal-professional

dialogue. Pursuing this involves:

a cycle of critical reflection to maximise the capacity for critical thought ...professional freedom and connection with, rather than distance from clients (Pietroni, 1995: 3)

Reflection is not a neutral process, but requires awareness of and commitment to anti-oppressive values and actions, and 'continually checking back with the value-base' (Issitt, 1999: 31), to be vigilant of the state's capacity to transmute the transgressive nature of anti-oppressive practice into an individualising and controlling institutional orthodoxy (McLaughlan, 2005).

All this implies democratic engagement and an educational approach to practice which seeks both understanding and change within the social, political and organisational context of practice as well as amongst practitioners and users. Technical expertise and subject-specific knowledge are necessary, but insufficient for the success of this process which in crucial and complex situations requires spontaneity and experiential judgement informed by theoretical understanding rather than formulaic approaches. This is illustrated in Issitt's (1999: 31) research as participants used critical reflection to make connections with different aspects of people's lives, that anti-oppressive practice involves. According to one woman:

reflective, anti-oppressive practice is a way of life, a state of being. It encompasses one's personal, social and professional practice. The long-term goal being the creation of a more inclusive society.

This might be idealistic but it was important to have a vision to aim for and the synthesis of anti-oppressive and reflective practice is demanding for workers and organisations:

It requires you to do two jobs at once. It requires you to be a reflective practitioner and be anti-oppressive about what you have done. (ibid)

Insofar as there are differences of interest between user groups, practitioners, researchers and politicians, such a process is risky in that it is likely to encourage a critical perspective on and 'distance from' the intentions and values of policy initiatives. The price of the security offered by evidence-based practice is the loss of criticality.

Unlike the 'disinterested' evidence required for policy development, the approach to critical reflection advocated here implies that practitioners not only adjust to the professional world which they inhabit, but that they also act reflexively to construct and reconstruct it. This is undertaken as they are confronted by and create changing relationships and structures (Ellison, 1997; Brent, 2004). Reflection involves not only observation, recording and evaluation, but also, in association and dialogue with others, the creation of new knowledge and understanding (Flyvbjerg, 2001). It is an act of ongoing learning, which includes the perspectives of users. Critical reflective practice is not a neutral activity; all processes and practices are constructed by experiences of the wider social context which concurrently reproduces inequalities and sites for their resistance (Issitt, 1998). This approach, which sees the possibilities for, and constraints upon personal agency in relation to the professional and political, can obviate the dangers of self-surveillance whereby practitioners internalise and

blame themselves for problems not of their own making (Bleakley, 1999).

Practitioner knowledge is constantly evolving through professional association which demands dialogue and conversation between practitioners as subjects and subject-others (Smith, 1994). Aside from the formal and 'knowable' aspects of practice, there are everyday actions and conversations which in essence are open-ended, risky and developmental for those engaged. These 'indeterminate zones' are the bedrock of practice. Without success at this level, practitioners in educational and welfare contexts cannot hope to succeed even in a technical sense. Yet it is these very aspects of practice which are being colonised and destabilised by the separation of research from value and practice concerns, by the imperatives of policy-making and efficiency in guiding research which inevitably focuses upon the technically and mechanistically knowable. Such an approach to research is doomed to undermine that which it pretends to improve.

Researchers as critical reflective practitioners and conclusions

The interests of the academy are now tied to practice through questions often not generated within intellectual work or the practice situation, but through the instrumental and authoritarian demands of politicians. Social scientists and professional practitioners, independently and with reference to different organisational 'missions', serve the demands and dictates of policy and are expected to perform to externally generated criteria that promote separation of delivery and evaluation.

Nevertheless, researchers have an acknowledged expertise in research methodology. These are capable of yielding evidence which has general application, transcending the localism and particularity of the practice situation. Intellectual work, both within professional practice and within the academy must use empirical evidence as part of the process of knowledge-making and meaning-making. However, to direct practice only in relation to evidence produced within research and evaluation as currently constructed, and to elevate the data from these practices above knowledge generated within the relational aspects of practice, can obstruct effective and meaningful partnerships between researchers and related professional practice. Privileging 'research evidence' over practice knowledge subverts the possibility of improving practice in collaboration with researchers who are alert to this situation, and who espouse a similar framework for critical reflection in relation to their own research practice (Colley, 2003).

Not all responsibility for initiating dialogue lies with the researcher. Without undertaking the work required to create a set of practice-informed discourses, or the risks involved in criticality, practitioners will inevitably remain vulnerable to the imposition of externally generated meanings. To reflect in a manner which systematises the knowledge emerging from everyday professional action is but one part of this process. Practitioners need to appraise themselves of wider issues of data collection, theorisation and policy making and must seek to participate in these processes from their own perspective. This includes the injunction to engage with theory, to develop the means of critical engagement with the research process and to contribute to policy making from the perspective of a considered understanding of the purposes, possibilities and limits of practice.

There are enormous implications for evidence-based policy. For policy to be effective, a much more considered understanding of the demands of practice 'on the ground' is required of policy makers. Policy changes are frequently enforced through a combination of structural re-organisation and evaluation procedures, but these processes in themselves are insufficient to ensure that the spirit of any given initiative is incorporated into everyday fieldwork relationships. Practitioners sometimes dissemble and subvert these in order to maintain their own priorities in action (Spence, 2004).

Professional practice, research and the creation and implementation of policy, are inextricably related. Each contains its particular purposes and areas of expertise, but none can be effective in isolation from the other. In order to maximise the possibilities of creating effective and progressive change to benefit service users, 'evidence' must be positioned in relation to other types of knowledge and truth claims. In particular, the knowledge which emerges from critical reflective practice, which is born of the necessity to create meaningful relationships with user groups, must be articulated and defended by practitioners, and must be acknowledged and embraced by researchers and politicians.

This is rarely witnessed because it requires and implies significant shifts in relations of power between politics, the academy and the field, a democratisation of research and policy-making and a renewal of intellectual work as a significant aspect of, and in dialogical relationship with practice. It indicates a dissolution of the artificial divide between those who are paid to think, research and evaluate and those whose role is to perform. Ultimately, the fault lines, tensions and gaps which are expressive of 'crisis' in the relationship between theory and practice will not be healed unless professional practitioner knowledge is legitimised within structures of power. As well as recognising that such knowledge cannot always be pinned down and concretised as 'evidence' there is a need to re-assess the place accorded to more conventional forms of evidence within regimes of truth that are commensurate with its limits as well as its virtues.

In order to assert the authenticity of the research process and to maintain the authority of policy to prescribe the conditions of practice, practitioners and research/ theoreticians are exhorted to work in partnership. However, partnership can only be meaningful if the terms of reference for research shift back towards practice and away from the demands of policy. If researchers are seriously concerned to break down the barriers between academic and professional knowledge, it is essential that they recognise the dialectical and developmental dimensions of the process of acquiring practitioner knowledge and seek to reflect on being 'self' conscious of this in their own practices and procedures (Edwards, 2002). If they too view themselves as critical reflective practitioners, the notion of *phronesis* becomes a useful and meaningful concept as inquiry becomes value-based rather than artificially disconnected from research contexts.

Critically reflective research is seldom practiced because it is potentially transgressive in the contemporary, funding-led environment. This has been recognised by Fox (2003) who has attempted to address some of the issues raised by the notion of 'evidence-based practice', suggesting that this might be inverted to produce 'practice-based evidence'. The aim here would be for knowledge production to be relevant to the immediate local context, not always forced into the methodological straitjacket required for 'scientific' generalisation. Colley (2003:161) also

questions the proliferation of prevailing forms of evidence arguing that we need more 'theory-based policy and practice and practice-based evidence' enabling 'practitioners, and others who work in the field to do justice to the meanings they make in practice'. Such concerns rehearse similar debates within action research about its democratising potential for making visible and useful the discourses of practice (Winter, 1998).

Creative partnerships would break down rigid role boundaries between researcher and practitioner and avoid the danger of perpetuating existing knowledge divisions at the local level, exploring the spaces to generate researcher/practitioner knowledge that disrupts unproductive and wasteful separation of endeavour. They would promote critical reflection for knowledge generation about the personal, professional, political dynamic in which all are engaged. Hart and Bond (1995) suggest that the approach that is likely to be most empowering is one in which researchers and practitioners become co-researchers and co-change agents. Here researchers would become facilitators of the research and dissemination by practitioners and service users who may be the best placed to gain and make visible different kinds of knowledge. This does not mean that researchers become redundant. There is a need for range of knowledge and information for different purposes, but the power imbalance between evidence-based practice and practice-based evidence needs to be challenged (Fox, 2003).

The exchange of skills between researcher/practitioners and practitioner/researchers has the potential to make visible the discourses of educational and welfare practitioners. In practitioner/researcher partnerships, researchers may need to apply their research skills differently to facilitate the research and disseminate the findings of practitioners and service users. They are in a position to go beyond 'official' research and evaluation in which organisational responses may gloss over problems, silencing other important narratives.

Engagement in research processes has a dimension that is educational and developmental for both researchers and practitioners. This is seldom given due emphasis in current contracts as it is not defined as a research outcome. However, practitioner-informed research might afford precious space for personal and group-based reflection which may otherwise have been squeezed out of daily practice (Issitt, 1999, 2000). This can only enrich the knowledge constructed through the research process. A starting point for research partnerships would be to identify the individual and collective possibilities afforded by a shared approach to critical, reflective practice that seeks to understand the personal, professional and political dimensions involved.

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