

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE CHANGING CULTURE AND PRACTICE OF  
CHILDREN'S SERVICE PROFESSIONALS BETWEEN 2004 AND 2012

By

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis presents a quasi-longitudinal investigation of the lived experiences of Children's Service professionals in the period between the introduction of the 2004 Children Act to 2012: a period of public service austerity. The aim of the research was to gain an understanding of the factors which shape and transform professional behaviour. Data collection was undertaken using semi-structured interviews with Children's Service practitioners. Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) was used as an analytical framework through which to develop understandings of shifts in professional practice.

The analysis of interviews surfaced a number of professional shifts. These included: a re-conceptualisation of partnership working, from policy ambition to one based upon positive outcomes for children and families (a key research finding), together with a move from a universal to a targeted approach to the provision of services for children and young people ('service users' were redefined as 'customers of services' within a newly established business-like approach). The findings also illustrate the limited direct role that government policy took in shaping professional changes; this highlights the need for senior managers to translate national government policy into localised practice via clearly articulated strategic vision.

The study also tests out a range of theoretical perspectives and challenges those which present a stable and slowly evolving professional community; the study explores theoretical positions which present the transformation of professional practice as dynamic, fluid and idiosyncratic.

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## **DEDICATION**

I wish to dedicate this thesis to the memory of my father who always believed in me and ignited my interest in human behaviour.

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.1 The research aim**

This thesis was undertaken in a spirit of exploration as I attempted to navigate through two separate and distinct periods within the recent history of Children's Services in England. Through this 'exploration' the research aims to develop an understanding of the factors which have shaped professional behaviour. The quasi-longitudinal design of the research is embedded in Cultural Historical Activity Theory and presents a temporal and situated analysis of everyday working practices during these periods of structural and functional change. Its analytical framework echoes the recent work undertaken by Daniels (2010, 2011, and 2012), in which he attempts to "forge the hitherto elusive connection between macrostructures of power and control and micro processes of the formation of pedagogic consciousness" (Daniels, 2012, p.2).

#### **1.2 Cultural historical activity theory: an analytical framework**

Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) has been chosen as the analytical framework of the research presented within this thesis in order to help develop insights into individual and collective professional behaviour. CHAT is embedded in a European "tradition of thought" (Martin and Peim, 2009, p.131) which originated in the USSR; through the work of Lev Vygotsky (Cole *et al*, 1997; Daniels, 2004, 2005; Edwards and Daniels, 2004; and Kozulin, 1986). Socio-cultural activity theory (SCAT), although closely aligned to CHAT, is "informed by North American traditions



of anthropology, interactionism and pragmatism of the adaptable self” (Martin and Peim, 2009, p.131). While both perspectives share common theoretical origins and conceptualise “learning and development as mediated processes” (Daniels, 2004, p.121); there have been debates over the differences in their appropriation of Vygotsky and the extent to which they comprise distinct approaches (Daniels, 2004; Martin and Peim, 2009). Discussion of distinctions between CHAT and SCAT will be picked up in Chapter Two of this thesis. In short, however, the current thesis defines SCAT as encompassing a range of different theoretical perspectives which focus upon semiotic mediation with a particular focus on speech. CHAT, on the other hand, whilst acknowledging the importance of communication, places ‘activity’ at the centre of its analysis of human behaviour (Cole, 1996). Despite these differences “both approaches attempt to theorise and provide methodological tools for investigating the processes by which social, cultural and historical factors shape human functioning” (Daniels, 2004, p.121).

In the past thirty years Yrjö Engeström has pioneered the work of CHAT and established it as a research tool with which to study organisational and professional learning. Engeström’s development of CHAT has utilised aspects of Vygotsky’s work by using “collective, artefact mediated and object orientated activity” (Engeström, 2001, p.135) as a minimum unit of analysis for understanding workplace behaviour. His innovations in activity theory focus upon the dynamics between: the *subjects* (actors) within a given activity, the *object* that is the focus of their activity and the *tools* through which their work on the *object* is mediated. *Subject*, *tool* and *object* are therefore understood in relation to each other and to the *rules*, *division of labour* and

*communities* in which the activity is embedded; which he calls an “Activity System” (Engeström, 1999, p.26) (See fig. 2).

Engeström highlights the transformative potential of activity and presents his theory of ‘expansive learning’ (Engeström, 1999, 2001), in which he highlights how everyday workplace activities, *tools* and environments have the potential, as they are negotiated by workers, for transformation and change. He has also introduced Developmental Work Research (DWR) interventions (Engeström, 1996, 2005) as a way of promoting expansive learning within the workplace, through CHAT-based research interventions, in order to facilitate a change in professional behaviour. CHAT, however, does not always involve DWR interventions and can be used as a heuristic tool to analyse and develop understanding of working practices within their real life context (Cole, 1996). CHAT therefore, primarily through its depiction of an activity system (Engeström, 1999), provides a robust framework through which an objectified analysis of professional behaviour within a complex work environment, can be examined and better understood (cf. Kozulin, 1986).

### **1.3 The research questions**

This thesis examines professional practice in periods of change, instability and uncertainty. For Engeström and other proponents, CHAT is a powerful tool for understanding learning and practice in moments of instability. The research on which this thesis is based has a quasi – longitudinal structure, in that it is based upon studies of Children’s Services professionals in 2004; studies of professionals working in the same organisations in 2012; and a comparison of the two. These two dates

can be seen to represent the beginning and the end of a period of significant investment and expansion of Children's Services following the introduction of the *Every Child Matters: Green Paper* (DfES, 2003), the global economic crisis (Rapoport and Gerts, 2010), and the introduction of a range of austerity measures entailing cuts in public funding following the election of the Conservative-LibDem coalition government in 2010 (Biressi and Nunn, 2014; Evans, 2012). The longitudinal approach enables identification of consistencies and disparities, stability and transformation, in order to clarify what did and did not facilitate change in professional practice and how professionals experienced shifts in organisation and practice. The research questions for the study are:

- What were the features of professional practice within Children's Services in England in 2004 and 2012?
- What similarities and differences in practice and professional identity were apparent between these periods?
- What can be learnt about the transformation of professional practice in Children's Services?

#### **1.4 The origins of the research**

I first became interested in professional behaviour whilst I was employed as a secondary school geography teacher shortly after the National Curriculum was introduced in 1989. The introduction of a common curriculum ensured a significant change in practice for all teachers in England and Wales who prior to the 1989 Education Act (DES, 1989) had the freedom to plan and deliver their own school

based curricula. However, as I met with colleagues who worked in both primary and secondary school settings I was continually surprised to find very different attitudes towards its introduction among those who worked within the different education sectors, with secondary school teachers seeming to be much more resistant to the change process than their primary colleagues.

This disparity seemed to demonstrate the potential limitations that national policy can have upon professional practice for those who work within the public sector and highlighted how different professionals and different organisations viewed and reacted to externally directed change. Little did I know at the time that this marked the beginning rather than the end of a period of unprecedented transition for those involved in the management and delivery of education and children's services.

The unprecedented nature of change during this period, as a result of government policy implementation, is recognised by the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and young people's services (C4EO), who state:

“legislation and national guidance have largely set the priorities for Children's Services over the past 10 years from the Children's Act 1989 through Every Child Matter's and the Children Act 2004 and 2006, Education and Skills Act 2008 to more recent legislative and structural reforms including no less than three significant pieces of legislation in The Localism Bill, The Health and social Care Bill and Education Bill”. (Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and young people's services, 2010, p.11)

This sustained period of change was seen by Leadbetter (2008) as affecting all who work within the Children's Service arena.

I was able to investigate the manner in which this change affected associated professionals when I became a researcher within a Health Authority where I had responsibility to evaluate the outcomes of a newly formed trailblazer Sure Start programme (SSU, 1999). Sure Start (SSU, 1999) marked another significant governmental policy shift and highlighted the then 'new labour' government's (1997 – 2010) approach to tackling problems associated with social exclusion through the development of localised multi-agency partnerships and the creation of targeted intervention based preventative services. However, the Sure Start programme (SSU, 1999) that I had responsibility to evaluate took a long time to establish itself within the local community and it was during this initial period of stagnation, as a new building was constructed and new services identified and commissioned, that I had time to observe the dynamics of the newly formed multi-agency team. From this initial observation it soon became evident that there was a significant difference between the *co-location* of professionals within the Sure Start centre and the development of a *fully integrated* multi-agency team which was a primary aim of the Sure Start initiative (SSU, 1999) as the tensions between professional groups became increasingly evident.

The Sure Start programmes' apparent lack of success in encouraging service integration highlighted again the divide between the aims of government policy reform and the reality of day to day practice when translated into practical service

delivery. It was at this time that I started to wonder if government policy, regardless of how well intentioned it is, could change individual behaviour and in turn collective professional practice. My appointment as a university lecturer, in 2001, allowed me to continue the research I had started a year earlier without some of the restrictions I had experienced whilst working within a Health Authority. I was therefore free to pursue my theoretical interests in aspects of professional behaviour, rather than collect outcome measures of services that had only recently been introduced.

The continued existence of professional cliques within the two Sure Start programmes I was now working with was a recurrent issue which was raised time and time again by the different Sure Start managers. I therefore began to explore the reasons for the emergence of professional cliques or silos together with the role and functions that these cliques seemed to be fulfilling. Eventually, I started to view these cliques more as informal networks (c.f. Castells, 2000; Engestrom, 2004; Lave and Wenger, 1999) which served specific professional and non-professional functions, such as linking together specific groups of professionals; these cliques seemed to contrast sharply with the formal hierarchical structures of the traditional statutory organisations within which most of the individuals were employed.

In 2003 I was recruited as a researcher on the National Evaluation of the Children's Fund team and therefore had no option but to move on from my research of local Sure Start programmes (SSU, 1999) and focus my attention upon the newly introduced Children's Fund (CYPU, 2001) initiative. The Children's Fund's (CYPU, 2001) aim was to remove barriers to participation that existed for all children and

young people (aged 8 -13 years) and gave specific “ring fenced” funding to all local authorities within England. This funding was to be used specifically to promote partnership working within Children’s Services in order to set up and develop new preventive services and provided another opportunity to investigate how government policy acted out in reality. In particular, it led me again to question the impact that externally enforced government policy could have upon local practice.

Following my involvement with the National Evaluation of the Children’s Fund I became employed as an Extended School Manager within a local authority in the West Midlands. This change in employment forced me to deal with many of the issues I had observed through my role as a researcher within both Sure Start (SSU, 1999) and the Children’s Fund (CYPU, 2001).

The Extended School initiative (DfES, 2003) had links with both Sure Start (SSU, 1999) and the Children’s Fund (CYPU, 2001) in many philosophical and practical ways which was evident in its continued promotion of partnership working and its attempts to bring about the coordinated delivery of preventative services for children and their families within the local community. In many ways the Extended School initiative became a way of mainstreaming many of the services commissioned by the Children’s Fund (CYPU, 2001) and Sure Start (SSU, 1999) as well as being a practical driver for the *Every Child Matters*: Green Paper (DfES, 2003) and the introduction of Children’s Trusts (DfES, 2004) following the implementation of the 2004 Children Act.

The 2004 Children Act (DfES, 2004) presented a reconfiguration of the existing local authority structures which provided services for children and young people. Statutory agencies, such as; a Local Education Authority or Children's Social Care ceased to exist and in their place was introduced an integrated Children's Service which united pre-existing agencies under the umbrella of a Children's Trust (DfES, 2004) within which a Director of Children's Services was to devise and implement a locally agreed strategic plan which was jointly resourced and jointly implemented.

The year 2004 could be seen as a watershed as Local Education Authorities were replaced by the new Integrated Children's Services, in which joint commissioning and joint delivery was at the heart of the policy agenda which necessitated that "all existing structures and practices were reviewed and revised" (Leadbetter, 2008, p.198) so that the 'one size fits all' philosophy which had existed within local authorities for so long was replaced with the requirement "that services should be responsive to individuals and families and become much more flexible in their organisational structures and service delivery" (Leadbetter, 2008, p.198).

It is within this context that my study has developed into one which reflects upon the attempts made by 'new labour' (1997-2010) and the current coalition government (2010 – present) to transform the organisation and practice of Children's Services through the introduction of a number of Acts, policies and initiatives together with significant financial investment over an extended period of time.



## **1.5 The research context**

This study focuses upon the Children's Service portfolio of a local authority located within the West Midlands region. In 2003 this local authority, like all located within England, became the focus for unprecedented reform by the then Labour Government, which had introduced the *Every Child Matters*: Green Paper in 2003 (DfES, 2003), following the tragic death of Victoria Climbié and the associated Laming enquiry (Laming, 2003), which highlighted the inherent weaknesses that existed, at the time, in the organisation, coordination and delivery of services for children and young people within a wide range of statutory agencies. The Laming report identified the need to change the infrastructure within Children's Services, so that the failures made evident within its findings were never repeated. This resulted in a central government commitment to place the needs of children, rather than the needs of the associated professionals, at the hub of children's service provision (DfES, 2003) through the introduction of a range of local and national initiatives which promoted and facilitated a coordinated and joined up approach to the provision of Children's Services. This was eventually enacted in the 2004 Children Act (DfES, 2004).

My first round of data collection took place just as this significant piece of legislation was being implemented in 2004. The second round of data collection took place in the same local authority eight years later, in 2012; during another period of change and transformation. However, the change that took place in 2012 was not as a result of investment or governmental policy ambitions but was as a result of a range of austerity measures (Biressi and Nunn, 2014; Evans, 2012) introduced by the

Coalition Government, following the election of May 2010. The Conservative – Liberal Democrat coalition was among those European governments that argued the need to implement austerity measures, in response to the global economic crisis. These measures included wide-ranging welfare cuts and reductions in both central and local government spending (Rapoport and Gerts, 2010).

## **1.6 The rationale for the study**

The need for a better understanding of professional behaviour within reconfigured Children's Services is highlighted by Warmington (2009, p.85), who states that "professionals find themselves located in complex, vertiginous settings in which individual and collective practices are undergoing radical transformation that necessitates new learning and knowledge creation". He believes that there is a general underestimation of the "qualitative changes" needed in professional practice with government policy and related literature failing to capture "the landscape of emerging practice" (Warmington, 2009, p.85).

By examining the changes in professional behaviour that occurred between 2004 and 2012, it is hoped that this study captures the changing professional landscape, and gain insight into the mechanisms involved in the transformation of professional practice. Holland *et al* (2008) highlight the importance that periods of transition, such as the ones identified within this study, have for researchers interested in collective behaviour, arguing that it is during these periods of "upheavals, uncertainties, and challenges" that the "dialogic dynamics of collective identity are most apparent" (Holland *et al*, 2008, p.100). Examination of such periods provides the potential to

gain unique insight into the impact that organisational change can have upon individual and collective behaviour.

The need to better understand the change process within large complex organisations is also highlighted in the recent independent inquiry into the care provided by Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust, which found that patients were routinely neglected because of a preoccupation with cost cutting, targets, and processes (Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust, 2010). These findings act as a stark reminder of the problems that can occur if organisations, that have responsibility for the care and welfare of vulnerable individuals, fail to prioritise their work appropriately. It is therefore the intention of this study to use Cultural Historical Activity Theory to learn lessons from the events that have taken place between 2004 and 2012 so that a similar lack of prioritisation does not take place within Children's Services and the object of work related activity remains focussed upon the education and welfare of children and young people.

## **1.7 Overview of the thesis**

As has been previously stated, via its quasi-longitudinal CHAT based approach, this thesis provides unique access into the everyday working lives of practitioners employed within Children's Services during a turbulent period of change. The privileged nature of this access was as a result of my previous employment within the local authority being researched and the resultant professional relationships that I developed with the research participants; allowing for open, honest and often frank responses to the questions I posed during the often lengthy interviews.

The data collection process took place in two phases. The first phase of the data collection process took place in 2004, following the introduction of the 2004 Children Act and the second phase took place eight years later in 2012; during which time a new government administration had been elected and a new era for Children's Services was emerging from the ashes of the 'new labour' government's (1997-2010) Children's Service policy ambitions. This thesis therefore provides an intimate portrayal of the way in which practitioners respond to structural and professional changes demanded of them and thereby provides insight into the factors that inhibit and promote organisational transformation. The quasi-longitudinal aspect to the research adds another dimension to the study and allows for an historical perspective to be gained as to the changing nature of the work of Children's Service practitioners. As has been mentioned previously, in order to gain insight into this complex arena I have used Cultural Historical Activity Theory to frame my analysis; CHAT is a theoretical perspective which, arguably, remains unevenly understood within organisational studies (Daniels and Gutierrez, 2009). This thesis therefore provides an opportunity to 'test out' CHAT as a practical tool for the analysis and interpretation of professional behaviour within large complex organisations.

The historical development of CHAT is presented and discussed in the following chapter which focuses primarily upon the work of its pioneers; Vygotsky, Leont'ev and Engeström who developed an alternative to introspective psychological perspectives to the study and interpretation of human behaviour. Other comparable perspectives of upon learning are also included as is a contextualised review of the historical policy context which forms the back drop of the study. The subsequent

methodology chapter provides a detailed examination of the key methodological considerations that took place during the research as I attempted to translate the theoretical aspects of CHAT into a practical and achievable research process.

The findings of the research are presented within three Chapters; Four, Five and Six. Chapters Four and Five follow the same structure with each analysing the data that was collected in each of the two phases of data collection; 2004 and 2012. The analysis of this data uses an “activity system” (Engeström, 1999, p.26) as the unit of measurement and uses the categories evident within these to analyse and interpret the interview transcripts before moving on to identify the structural and professional tensions that were evident from this analysis. The analysis chapters then conclude by reflecting upon how these findings relate to the theoretical positions that are presented in the literature review in Chapter Two. Chapter Four and Five can therefore be seen to act as stand-alone chapters which present an in depth analysis of the culture and behaviour of interviewees evident within each of the two phase of research.

Chapter Six brings these two ‘separate’ chapters together and compares and contrasts the features of professional practice evident within 2004 and 2012 in order to tease out the characteristics and features of practice that are present or absent within and between the two dates and thereby allow for conclusions to be made as to what may or may not be considered to be influential in helping to shape professional behaviour. Chapter Six also draws from a brief questionnaire which was undertaken in 2012 which used some of the initial findings from the 2004 interview analysis to

help triangulate (Cohen *et al*, 2011) the observations that have been made from the comparison of the two phases of data collection and adds rigour to the already detailed analysis.

The final chapter reflects back over the research process and attempts to make sense of the complex and often nuanced data that has been collected and presented within the thesis in an attempt to identify the key learning points from the study, which could, if synthesised into the future work of Children's Service professionals, have significant impact upon the effectiveness of future professional practice. The final chapter also reflects upon the effectiveness of CHAT as a tool for researching professional behaviour within large complex organisations before making suggestions for future areas of research.

## **1.8 Conclusion**

This thesis provides socio-cultural insight into two unique phases in the history of Children's Services and provides findings which have historical, theoretical, methodological and professional significance for those interested in the development of Children's Services in England and in professional behaviour within large complex organisations. A summary of the findings of the thesis are presented below.

- Children's Service professionals' need very different skills to those required in 2004. 'Entrepreneurship' is now seen by practitioners to be central to this new skills set.

- The introduction of generic government policy does not take into consideration the individualistic nature of professional practice.
- The *rules* that practitioners follow often become the object of their work related activity. Rules must therefore be relevant, appropriate and flexible enough to allow practitioners to achieve the object of their work related activity.
- CHAT provides a useful tool in structuring the research process and in analysing the data collected however, identifying the subject within activity systems is open to a variety of interpretations which can and does cause confusion.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

**LITERATURE REVIEW: new professional contexts for children's service practitioners.**

### **2.1 Introduction**

Chapter Two, a review of literature, places this study within an appropriate historical context and briefly reviews the significant pieces of legislation that has led to the current context of Children's Services in England. It also discusses the theoretical development of CHAT from the early work of the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky to the current role of activity theory as a tool for understanding collective workplace learning and practice. This is accompanied by some alternative theoretical perspectives which help to give insight into the factors which shape professional behaviour.

### **2.2 Transforming professional behaviour to create the new multi-agency professional.**

The originality of this thesis lies, in part, in its quasi-longitudinal study of shifts in professional practice and identity in Children's Services. How then did 2004 differ from 2012? Let us begin with a few, necessarily broad sweeps, before discussing the changing professional and policy context in more detail. In 2004 the UK was still in the middle of a thirteen year Labour administration that rode on a putative economic boom, managed by an 'iron chancellor'. The New Labour government's social democratic credentials were in large part predicated upon its children and families policy (it renamed the Department of Education and Skills, the Department of



Children, Schools and Families and initiated the Every Child Matters agenda). In 2012 the UK, like much of the west, struggled in the aftermath of a global financial crash; one of the consequences of which was reduced welfare provision (Hutton, 2011). The UK was now governed by a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition concerned with cutting the deficit through austerity policies that included an increasingly marketised, managerial model for the public sector. The professional environment of these two dates was therefore very different and it is necessary to examine what lay at the heart of New Labour's and the Coalition children's services policy.

The Sure Start (SSU, 1999) and Children's Fund initiatives (CYPFU, 2001) predated the publication of the *Every Child Matters: Green Paper* (DfES, 2003) and demonstrated the commitment by the then Labour Government (1997-2010) to "promoting joined up policy-making" (DfES, 2001, p.3) for the provision of services for all children and young people. The 2004 Children Act can be seen as the culmination of this increasingly "joined up" (DfES, 2001, p.3) philosophy to the delivery of Children's Services by putting into effect the legislative changes necessary to achieve the "the country's first holistic vision for children's universal, preventative and targeted services" (DfES, 2003, p.1).

The 2004 Act required all local authorities, within in England, to work with statutory and non-statutory agencies as part of the new Children's Trust (DfES, 2004) arrangements and introduced a range of new powers which required agencies to share information in order that they could jointly plan and commission services in

order that each local authority could achieve the *Every Child Matter's*: Five Outcomes (DfES, 2003) for all children and young people. The Five Outcomes are listed below.

- Being Healthy
- Staying Safe
- Enjoying and Achieving
- Making a positive Contribution
- Achieving economic well-being

The challenge of achieving these outcomes was seen by Edwards (2007, p.83) as requiring “radical changes” in order to create “new ways of thinking about professional practices”. In particular, they would require an integrated, holistic, wrap-around conception of services working with children and families. The extended school initiative (DfES, 2002) could be viewed as the primary vehicle through which the Labour Government tried to create this new way of working so that the ‘Five Outcomes’ (DfES, 2003) could be translated from policy ambition to positive outcomes for all children and young people.

“Extended schools” were intended to act as localised hubs for the delivery of a range of services: referred to as the extended school ‘core offer’ (DfES, 2002). This ‘core offer’ included: afterschool clubs, childcare and access to specialist services which necessitated a new multi-agency approach which asked practitioners to engage “with many configurations of diverse social practice” in order that they could successfully operate “across traditional service and team boundaries” (Daniels, 2010, p.381). The concept of an extended school however was not new; its origins arguably lay in the

‘village schools’ which were formed in rural parts of Wales by Henry Morris in the 1920’s and which provided schooling together with a range of facilities for the use of the surrounding rural communities (Cummings *et al*, 2004).

- Edwards (2004) believes that multi-agency working of this type is needed in order to develop resilience in vulnerable children in response to the debilitating effect of social exclusion with agencies needing to wrap protective layers around the individual child in a bespoke manner.
- Riddell and Tett (2004), however, question whether such an equitable partnership is actually possible due to the power imbalance caused by social class, gender and race, whilst Daniels (2011) also questions the feasibility of multi-agency working by suggesting that everyday professional discourse can prevent the full integration of different professional groups; as it reinforces the way that different professional groups respond to events in specific ways.

The White Paper; *Your child, your schools, our future: building a 21<sup>st</sup> century schools system* (DCSF, 2009) reiterated the Labour government’s commitment to the extended schools concept however following the election of the ConLibDem coalition government in May 2010 many of the initiatives and structures which were introduced by the previous administration came to an end and a new era for Children’s Services began. The ambitions of this new era for Children’s Services was articulated within “The Department for Education Business Plan” (DfE, 2010), which was put into statute via the 2011 Education Act, and identified its new set of priorities for children and young people. These being:

1. To increase the number of high quality schools.
2. To reform the school curriculum.
3. To reduce bureaucracy and improve accountability.
4. To train and develop professionals who work with Children.
5. To develop new support for the Early Years.
6. To improve support for children and Young People and families focussing upon the most disadvantaged.

These priorities seem markedly different to the “Five Outcomes” identified within the Children Act of 2004 by refocusing resources upon schools rather than the individual child. Another notable feature of the 2010 business plan (DfE, 2010) is the change in the role of the local authority. In 2004 the local authority was given a lead role in securing the co-operation of the partners in setting up Children’s Trust arrangements whereas in 2011 the role is seen as “shifting from managing maintained provision to one of strategic commissioner” (DfE, 2010) in which the local authority is a champion for educational excellence and advocate for vulnerable children.

This re-conceptualisation of the role of the local authority has been accompanied by a significant change in focus as to the form and function of services for children and young people. The holistic, integrated approach to the provision of services for children and young people that was evident in 2004 has arguably been replaced with a focus upon schools and schooling (DfE, 2010) within a world of recession and funding cuts. Buras *et al* (2012) however suggest that the global economic crisis has created an opportunity for governments to use the concept of *austerity* in order to

introduce neoliberal reforms which challenge our traditional understanding of the relationship between the state and public sector. This viewpoint is supported by Levitas who states; “The discourse of cuts and austerity that accompany 2010 is a neoliberal shock doctrine providing an excuse for further appropriation of social resources by the rich” (Levitas, 2012, p. 322). Levitas therefore believes that the term *austerity* has become a “justifying mantra for the coalition economic and social policy” (Levitas, 2012, p. 322).

Despite these differences in the content of the ‘New Labour’ and Conservative-LibDem coalition government’s policies, commentators have argued that there remains a similarity in the philosophy which underpins their attitude to the provision and delivery of public services. Cerny and Evans (2004) believe that ‘New Labour’ adopted a policy agenda which reflected the “continuing transformation of the British industrial welfare state into a competitive state” (Cerny and Evans, 2004, p.51). The notion of a ‘competitive state’ implies a quasi-marketised approach, one in which discourses of efficiency, accountability and managerialism have come to dominate public provision. The ‘competitive state’ is grounded in government concerns about the unaffordability of an expanding, ‘large state’ welfare sector and, arguably, about the channelling of tax revenue into state welfare provision (Hutton, 2011). Moreover, the idea of ‘the competitive state’ has emerged in the UK within the context of globalisation, wherein national governments’ control over economic conditions has decreased due to the growth of complex, international and interdependent systems of banking, investment and trade terms (Hutton, 2013; Lanchester, 2010).

This was evident in the degree to which 'New Labour' saw investment in the welfare state as necessary in providing the "opportunity structures on which an efficient stakeholder economy ultimately depends" (Cerny and Evans, 2004, p.55). In other words, New Labour's social policy discourse increasingly depicted the welfare state as a means of enabling the socially disadvantaged to help themselves through accessing putative opportunities in education and training, rather than favouring reliance on direct redistribution of wealth through the benefit system. In this way, argues Wright (2012), 'New Labour' continued the neoliberal policies of the previous Thatcherite governments, albeit in a manner that presented neo-liberalism with "a human face" (Wright, p. 282). New Labour's rhetorical softening of neo-liberal, market-friendly policies, aimed to take the 'edge' off capitalism. New Labour's residual social democratic rhetoric aimed to make its market-driven policies more palatable to those who traditionally considered themselves to occupy a 'centre left' political perspective (Toynbee and Walker, 2011). In this way, argues Wright (2012), the once seemingly incompatible goals of social justice and fairness were subsumed into a market logic that deemed equality of opportunity (in the form of education and training) to be the most efficient means for individuals to achieve social and economic inclusion.

The Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government that was elected in 2010 can be seen to have continued this neoliberalist agenda of reform by introducing the concept of the 'Big Society'. The coalition furthered reform of local government (and governance) structure within England through the abolition of monitoring bodies such as the Audit Commission and the introduction of the Localism Act (Lowndes and

Pratchett, 2012; DfE, 2011). This reform agenda has its roots within a neoliberalist desire to reduce the size of the 'state' and increase the role that civil society plays. This model envisages civil society (in the form of individual initiative, the private sector, the third sector) filling the gaps left by the reduction in the size and power of the state machinery and creating new ways of addressing social exclusion (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012). However Lowndes and Pratchett believe that the coalition governments drive towards 'localism', as defined within the Localism Act (DfE, 2011), has arguably been derailed due to the "political expediency of the budget cuts" (,2012, p22) that were required at a time of public sector austerity. The austerity agenda that was the coalition government's response to recession led to a proposed 27% reduction in public spending within the 2010 spending review (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012).

The Conservative commitment to austerity (that is to extensive cuts in public spending), combined with a failure by their LibDem partners to embed any distinctive "blend of liberalism and community politics" (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012, p22), has produced what Lowndes and Pratchett (2012) believe is an incoherent national policy context. They describe current policy on local government and social services as still heavily influenced by the deeply entrenched policies of 'New Labour'; policies which have embedded the concept of performance and partnership into the working practices of all local authorities. It is this approach, rather than the poorly defined and articulated notions of the Big Society, that continues to shape Children's Services provision and other areas of provision (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012).

The manner in which government policy, as outlined above, has impacted upon the professional practice of those who work within Children's Services is a particular focus of this study and I now turn my attention towards Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) and other associated theoretical perspectives as a means of gaining such insight into the factors which influence and shape professional behaviour.

### **2.3 Activity and mediation: understanding human behaviour**

Cole (1996), although firmly positioned within the theoretical perspective of SCAT, rather than CHAT (Martin and Peim, 2009), believes that the motives affecting the way in which people behave can only be understood in association with the contextual factors within which people live. He does not see 'context' in this sense as the physical environment but asks us to go beyond this understanding to see consciousness as "content driven, domain specific and constructively stimulus bound" (Cole, 1996, p.4). Cole therefore does not see consciousness as separate from the institutional world in which it plays "a co-constructive part" (Cole, 1996, p.4).

This assertion by Cole that consciousness is co-constructed through an individual's interaction and relationship with their social, cultural and historical context is a complex one and is certainly worthy of further clarification as it lies at the heart of both sociocultural and cultural historical activity theory. Cole (1996) believes that an individual's behaviour is transformed by their interaction with their context. These interactions eventually transform the contexts within which they live and work, thereby creating the potential for a further transformation of behaviour. This dialogic, spiralling process of continual change and transformation is created through this



interrelationship between actors and contexts; it is within this dynamic between behaviour (or practice) and context that learning can be seen to take place as a process of transformation, rather than one which is governed and explained by specific universal laws (Penn, 2005).

This type of transformational learning can be seen to occur, within the context of this study, when professional behaviour changes as practitioners negotiate the introduction of a new national policy. This 'negotiation' in turn creates a changed context in which new forms of professional behaviour are again possible. In this spiralling fashion learning transforms individuals and the contexts in which they are active. A central tenet of CHAT is that in dynamic, unstable practice environments new behaviour is not learnt from more knowledgeable peers but rather develops as a continual process of negotiation and transformation (Cole, 1996; Engestrom, 2001). The shifting context of UK children's services between 2004 and 2012 is an example of an unstable context in which new professional practices developed. We therefore cannot understand professional behaviour without also understanding the context within which the practitioners function.

Richard Shweder (1996) agrees with Cole and states that context cannot exist which is free from human interpretation and analysis from the people who come into contact with it. Shweder suggests that this interpretation and analysis is a process that goes both ways so that the person is changed through the interaction with their cultural context. He believes that if this interaction and interpretation takes places consistently over a period of time by an organised group of people then a "culture will

and can start to develop” (Shweder, 1996, p.102). It therefore implies that given time and continuity it would be possible to develop a new professional culture for Children's Service professionals as envisaged within the *Every Child Matters*: Green paper.

Cole's and Shweder's theoretical perspective concerning the influence that the environment has over the individual was informed by Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) which was developed in the USSR in the early part of the twentieth century (Kozulin, 1986) and claims that “the structure and development of human psychological processes emerge through culturally mediated, historically developing, practical activity” (Cole, 1996, p.5). CHAT presents us with the concept of “activity” (Kozulin, 1986) which is seen to provide the mechanism by which consciousness and behaviour can be explained and also the unit with which it can be examined. Dadydov sees activity, in this sense, to be “a specific form of the societal existence of humans consisting of purposeful changing of natural and social reality” (as cited in Engeström *et al*, 1999, p.39) which therefore has relevance for a study which focuses upon the changing culture and practice of practitioners following a particularly turbulent period within the context of Children's Services.

CHAT therefore challenges the more narrow individual introspective psychological views of human behaviour and consciousness. It offers a methodological framework from which researchers can investigate and explore the actions and behaviour of people taking part in everyday cultural contexts (Engeström, 1999) and is useful within this study's attempt at examining the true motives for professional behaviour in

light of externally enforced professional transformation through policy implementation. However, activity and therefore activity theory cannot truly be understood out of its own history: a history which reflects the intricacies and complexities of the theory itself (Kozulin, 1986).

## **2.4 The origins of the Cultural Historical School of Psychology approach to human behaviour**

CHAT was developed primarily through the work of Vygotsky, Leont'ev and Luria (Luriya *et al*, 1979) with its philosophical roots being traced back even further to the work of Engels, Marx, and Wundt (Luriya *et al*, 1979). Engels recognised the importance of the relationship of people and the environment; which he saw as providing insight into human consciousness (see Luriya *et al*, 1979). Wundt distinguished between two areas of psychology; “physiological psychology” and “higher psychological functions” (Cole *et al*, 1997, p.2) and questioned the use of an experimental methodology for the study of the latter, suggesting that a non-laboratory design would be more appropriate. A non-laboratory approach was adopted by Vygotsky (Kozulin, 1986); the father of the cultural historical school of psychology (Kozulin, 1986).

## **2.5 The contribution of Vygotsky**

Vygotsky (Kozulin, 1986) saw human behaviour being mediated by language which acted as an interface between; the culture, the individual and the identified action, to achieve what Wundt referred to as “Higher psychological functions” (Cole *et al*, 1997). Language in this sense can be verbal or non-verbal and connects the

historical and cultural context to the present action of an individual to produce a particular form of behaviour. It is of particular relevance to this study which investigates how new professional behaviour can be seen to evolve from preceding professional practice.

This identification by Vygotsky of the importance of language as the central means by which human beings internalise socially orientated actions is central to his theoretical approach in which he saw language as shaping the consciousness of the individual through a process of internalisation or what he called “inner speech” (Kozulin, 1986, p.269). Vygotsky also recognised the importance of artefacts in shaping the actions and behaviour of people. Artefacts in this sense are seen as any ‘artificial’ aid which allows the individual to go beyond the natural biological capability which all animals possess (Vygotsky, 1978), such as, the use of smart phones which allow individuals to record and recall events that may otherwise be forgotten. In this way these artificial aids act as a repository of information from which a person can refer to and therefore extend their own cognitive ability and ultimately help shape their behaviour. So significant are the use of tools in the development of the individual that prior to their use the behaviour of humans could be said to mirror that of an animal. Vygotsky identified this process of deliberate tool usage as “the most significant moment in the course of intellectual development” (Vygotsky, 1978, p.24) and in creating behaviour which was “uniquely human” (Vygotsky, 1978, p.24). He saw the convergence of the use of “speech and practical activity” (Vygotsky, 1978, p.24) as transforming the behaviour of the individual to the extent that it no longer resembled the ‘ape like’ behaviour it previously exhibited. Vygotsky (1978) noted

that this acquisition of language allowed the individual to demonstrate aspects of behaviour which they previously had not. The actions of the individual could also be seen to be much less impulsive and spontaneous with strategies and tools being employed and incorporated into action in order to achieve pre-specified objectives. Speech therefore not only allows for the setting and achievement of personal goals but it also, in the manner it directs action, ultimately controls the behaviour of the individual.

Speech also brings a temporal dimension to human behaviour in the way that it allows for factors to be considered which do not exist in the immediate visual field of the individual. Historically accumulated knowledge, evident within professional practice, therefore exists as a resource for individuals to draw from which can be used to inform immediate action and behaviour. Speech therefore acts as “a new method of uniting the elements of past experience with the present” (Vygotsky, 1978, p.36) allowing behaviour to be effected by previous experience and also enabling it to take place over a sustained period of time; widening the potential and scope of human activity. It may therefore be seen as a bridge from past experience to present action, a feature which could be seen to limit the potential for future transformation of behaviour especially within a complex local authority context within which traditional ways of working have the potential to limit the extent that transformation is possible.

Speech in this sense must not be seen as a tool which simply increases the options for behaviour. It must be recognised as the significant factor which is responsible for

the transformation of the psychology of the individual so that they are no longer the individual that they were prior to the acquisition of speech. Vygotsky therefore saw;

“the system of signs restructuring the whole psychological process and enabling the individual to master their own movement.” (Vygotsky, 1978, p.35).

The development and use of language by the individual is seen to allow humans to go beyond “the biological dimensions of the human nervous system” and is therefore considered by Vygotsky to be the “immediate cause of human behaviour” (Vygotsky, 1978, p.40). By inserting “artefacts into human actions” (Engeström, 2001, p.134) Vygotsky was able to make the link with ‘the individual’ and with what had been seen previously as “the untouchable social structure” (2001, p.134). Human behaviour could therefore no longer be understood by individual introspective studies of human consciousness but needed to take into consideration the context within which people live and work.

Vygotsky’s recognition that through the acquisition and use of language the individual is capable of things which previously they were not, cannot, for the purpose of this study, be overstated, as it suggests that an initiative such as extended schools’ which tried to encourage a new way of working and new professional vocabulary, may be capable of transforming the behaviour which is exhibited within the workplace. This relationship between human behaviour and his or her context within which they live and work is summarised by Vygotsky, who stated;

“The basic characteristic of human behaviour in general is that humans personally influence their relations with the environment and through that environment personally change their behaviour” (Vygotsky, 1978, p.52).

Vygotsky therefore suggests that professional behaviour is embedded within the environment in which they work. Human behaviour may therefore, theoretically, be transformed by changes to the work context. Vygotsky's work not only created a new psychological perspective regarding human consciousness but by identifying “socially meaningful activity”, (1986, p.264) as the vehicle for studying consciousness and human behaviour, he had also created a methodological approach to the study of individual consciousness. Within this “socially meaningful activity” Vygotsky saw an opportunity for an objective analysis of human behaviour. In particular he believed that human consciousness and how people viewed their worlds could be understood by investigating the tools that people use and especially in the manner in which these tools are used. Vygotsky's identification of language and mediation as the central factor in shaping an individual's behaviour however, was not shared by his close colleague and founder member of the Russian Cultural Historical School, Leont'ev. In Leont'ev's work we see a shift from the mediating artefact to the object which is the focus of the subject's thinking or action.

## **2.6 The contribution of Leont'ev**

Leont'ev also drew from the writings of Marx, and in particular from his discussion around “division of labour” and “use values” (Cole *et al*, 1978, p.4), when developing the cultural-historical concept of ‘activity’. Leont'ev deviated from Vygotsky's work in

that he changed the focus when studying activity away from sign mediation to that of “practical material action” (Kozulin, 1986, p.270) and developed a three level model of activity (Engeström *et al*, 1999, p.5). This model depicted action as taking through: “automated operation”, “individual action” and “collective activity” (Kozulin, 1986, p.270). “Collective activity” depicts the actions of the individual, as being part of, and therefore, motivated by, the goals of a collective group of individuals and is particularly relevant to this study, which examines professional practice within a large complex organisation. It can also be seen as a fore-runner to Engeström’s (2001) introduction of second and third generation activity system which are discussed later within this chapter and are used as the theoretical framework which underpins the data collection and analysis of this thesis.

Leont’ev did not share Vygotsky’s view that language and sign mediation are the central features within the development of an individual’s consciousness. Instead Leont’ev stated that the focus of activity should be upon the “actual relations with reality” (Kozulin, 1986, p.270) and disputed the fact that “semiotic” tools were an essential ingredient in developing the individual. This creates a theoretical divide between that of Vygotsky and Leont’ev in their perspectives on human consciousness which in turn has ramifications for the development of CHAT in that Vygotsky places language and its use, in all its forms, as shaping and directing behaviour; whereas Leont’ev suggests that it is the actual attempts made by people to respond to their context which ultimately creates and defines human behaviour.



Leont'ev proposed that "the structure of cognitive processes more or less repeats the structure of external operations" (Kozulin, 1986, p.270) and thereby focussed attention on the actions taking place during specific activities. He stated that "it is exactly the object of an activity that gives it a determined direction..... the object of an activity is its true motive" (Kozulin, 1986, p.271). The object in this case is seen as the focus of the activity and can be mistaken for an aim or objective; but it is more than this. It is what needs to be worked on in order that an overall aim can be achieved. An example of this may be seen in an attempt by a headteacher at developing extended services. From the outside the activity might be read as an attempt by the head teacher to improve the life chances of the children who attend the school. However, when we look at the decisions and activities that the headteacher takes we may discover that what is actually being worked on is an attempt by the head teacher to satisfy the requirements of the Ofsted inspection framework (Ofsted, 2006) so that the school achieves a good Ofsted report rather than supporting vulnerable children and families. In CHAT terms the Ofsted rating is therefore the true object of activity and not the welfare of the children.

Leont'ev's belief that human consciousness mediates the activity of an individual through developing a reflection of reality (Leont'ev, 1978) however; does not imply that he does not acknowledge the social nature of the formation of this consciousness. Instead he claims that human behaviour is based upon the reality that is revealed to us (Kozulin, 1986) during an individual's interaction with the world. In this way the individual internalises what exists externally and through the social positioning of the individual interprets and makes sense of this subjective world,

individually. In simpler terms, individuals will make sense of the world in a way which is relevant to them and has implications for policy writers who attempt to change the working practices of many thousands of individuals all of whom interpret their 'world' individually.

Leont'ev (1978) also brought our attention to the significance and importance of combined human action in the achievement of one goal or on working upon the same object. He highlighted how the distributed coordination of human actors could achieve the accomplishment, of what Engeström would later call, a *shared object* (Engeström, 2001) and highlighted the need for the collective study of human consciousness in order to understand the behaviour of individuals involved in any collective activity.

Kozulin, however, saw Leont'ev as being open to criticism in the fact that although he used Marxist categories such as; "production, appropriation, objectivation and disobjectivation" to create the context in which "practical material action" (Kozulin, 1986, p.270) took place, he failed to create the link which allowed for these to intersect. That is, he lacked an analysis of how these categories were mediated by others and brought into action. This omission cannot be avoided as Leont'ev himself had stated that it was the relations with reality and not processes of mediation which was central to understanding human behaviour and consciousness (Leont'ev, 1978). Kozulin (1986) suggests that Leont'ev had created a position which was indefensible in the fact that he could not reconcile practical action with the context

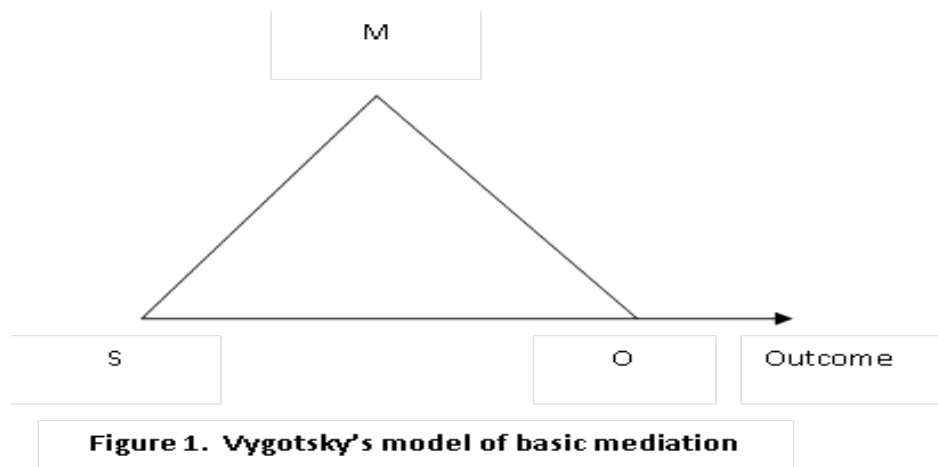
without some sort of mediation. The very thing with which Vygotsky had presented as central to his theory and which Leont'ev had been critical.

The aim of the Russian cultural historical school of psychology represented by both Vygotsky and Leont'ev had been to develop an integrated "modern approach to human cognition" (Cole and Engeström, 1993, p.40), which could be methodologically acceptable to both the natural and mental sciences of the time (Kozulin, 1986), and was a reaction to what Vygotsky had described as "sterile studies of consciousness" (Cole *et al*, 1978, p.5) which had led to what he termed a "crisis in psychology" (Cole *et al*, 1978, p.6). Thematically however, Vygotsky was also attempting to understand and explain the processes behind human consciousness and therefore human behaviour in a manner which united the Marxist emphasis upon societal change with the Engelian perspective on labour and tool usage (Cole *et al*, 1978) and is an area of which Engeström continues to develop and expand.

## **2.7 The contribution of Engeström**

Engeström (1999) has continued the work of the cultural historical school of psychology largely through the introduction and development of the concept of an activity *system*. An activity system can be seen as a development of the mediational triangle which was first developed by Vygotsky (1978, p.40) and which demonstrated the mediated nature of individual human action. It is represented in fig 1 below.

**Figure 1.**

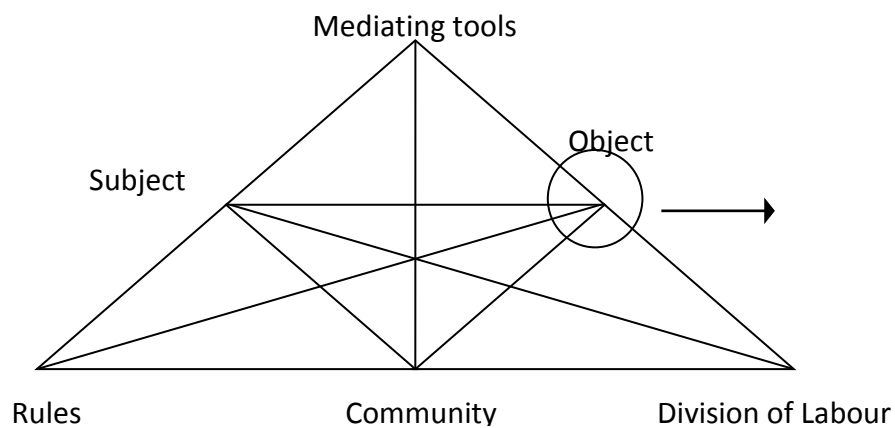


In figure one the letter 'S' represents the subject, 'M' the mediating artefact and 'O' the object of the activity; with the line connecting the subject to object illustrating the direct relationship that exists between the two. The mediating artefact is seen to facilitate action between subject and object and in so doing is seen to shape both human behaviour and determine the related outcome.

Leont'ev's views on the collective nature of human activity, as expressed within his example of a collective deer hunt (1978), developed Vygotsky's focus on the individual and although never produced diagrammatically were significant enough to lead Engeström (2001) to develop what he termed a second generation activity system which evolved from Vygotsky's model to include: subject, object, mediating artefact, division of labour, rules and community (Fig 2). The second generation model emphasises the collective nature of activity, the dynamics of activity in context. In this second generation activity system the subject, object and mediating artefact remain; however, the subject now represents a collective group of individuals, such as Children's Service professionals working within a local authority. Division of

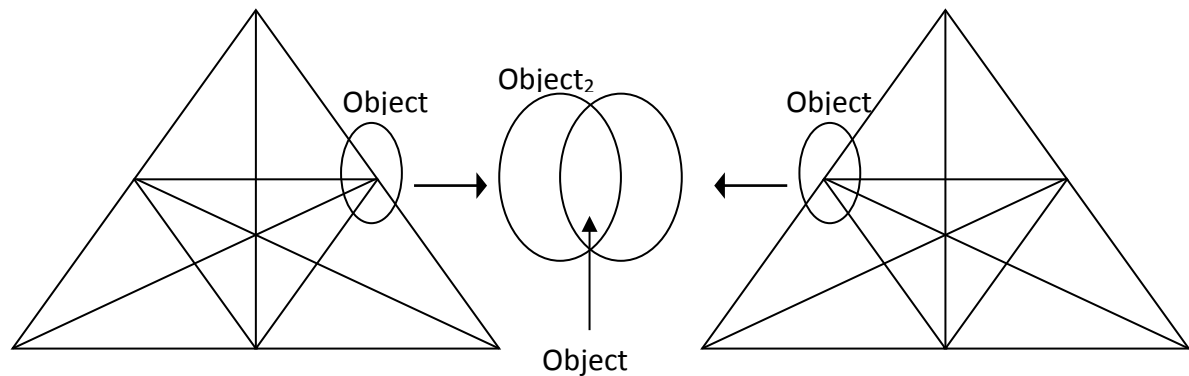
labour illustrates the working relationships which exist within the activity system and clarifies 'who does what'. The inclusion of rules is seen to represent the protocols or expectations that are attached to the behaviour of each of the actors with community encapsulating all the related actors that are associated with one particular activity system. A diagram of a second generation activity system is presented in fig 2 below.

**Figure 2: The structure of a human activity system**



An activity system may appear to be a rigid framework however; Engeström's (1999) developments attempt to reflect the multifaceted and fluid context which shape human behaviour. It therefore does not represent a diagram of human behaviour but rather illustrates the factors that interact to define types of human behaviour. It therefore offers a useful framework through which behaviour in context can be investigated. Engeström attempted to strengthen his second generation activity system through the introduction of the third generation model which enabled the investigation of complex "multiple perspectives" (Engeström; 2001, p.135) within interacting activity systems and can be seen in fig 3 below.

**Figure 3: Two interacting activity systems**



In order for Engeström (1999) to capture the dynamic nature of human behaviour within this rigid framework Engeström identifies a number of principles which underpin and exist within his concept of an activity system. These principles attempt to clarify the motivations behind human behaviour, and therefore professional practice and help illustrate and explain the way in which the object may be transformed over time and the system experience change.

“Historicity” is one such principle and is seen by Engeström (2001, p.135) as connecting past and present action, primarily, through the use of language and is seen as something which underlies all professional behaviour by shaping the context in which all activity is acted out. Behaviour in this respect is seen as the result of human social evolution in which both the language that is used and the actions that are carried out are shaped and affected by previous human experience. “Multi-voicedness” (Engeström, 2001, p.135) is a concept, introduced by Engeström, which recognises diversity in the collective. It implies that, through the articulation of competing voices, within a specific social context, certain contradictions and tensions

may manifest themselves which, through the different object motives they elicit in their interpretation of the object, will motivate and transform behaviour and ultimately the activity system itself (Cole *et al*, 1997). Contradictions are therefore seen to be central to systemic learning. It is a perspective which is supported by the anthropologist Dorothy Holland *et al* (2008, p.100) who states that “multiple discourses and versions of self are crucial in the cultural production of collective identities”. Contradictions are also seen to exist within all systems when old rules or patterns of practice are used to work on new objects. In relation to the context of this thesis this could be seen when local authorities attempt to deliver a new approach to Children’s Services without changing existing working practices. Engeström (2001) however, sees contradictions and tensions, such as this, as potential sources of change, development and transformation. These tensions are not therefore seen as features but are in fact structural tensions which exist within and between activity systems which if surfaced and resolved are the energy behind the change process and are a particular focus of the analysis of data within this thesis.

Third generation activity theory was Engeström’s attempt at recognising that different systems may be working on the same object. He does not make a great deal of this model in his current work were he has become, as we shall see, more interested in fluid connections between existing systems. Engeström *et al*’s (1991) study of American courts, in particular, helps shed light upon some of the issues identified above and in particular how the manner in which work practices and work behaviour can and do change.

## 2.8 Expansive learning

This change in workplace behaviour, which lies at the heart of this thesis, may result from what Engeström calls “expansive learning” which is a process through which practice and therefore behaviour is transformed through the process Engeström calls an “expansive cycle” (Engeström, 1999, p.384). This cycle depicts how an activity system is transformed and a new object created through an ‘ideal’ sequence of “epistemic actions” (Engeström, 1999, p.383) in which existing practice is questioned and eventually transformed.

Expansive learning is a dialectic process which incorporates a move from the “concrete” to the “abstract” (Fuller *et al*, 2005, p.151) in which the object is investigated so that its development can be further understood. The development of a new object is a crucial step in the development of new working practices and is seen by Engeström as taking place through the “emergence and resolution of its inner contradictions” (Engeström, 2005, p.151). In this way new theoretical concepts are seen to be created and new working practice generated. Avis (2010), however, warns against treating all learning within the workplace as a positive feature of activity suggesting that it can sometimes be considered counterproductive in certain situations and in certain practices.

Activity systems (Engeström, 1999) therefore do not remain stable but are continually vulnerable to change. As has been stated previously, Engeström sees contradictions, due to the “multi-voiced” nature of activity systems, within institutional contexts, “as the engine of change and development” (Cole *et al*, 1997, p.4). These



contradictions create conflict which serves to energise the process that propels an activity system through its “zone of proximal development” (Engeström, 1999, p.34) as learning takes place and new practice produced. Engeström’s (1999) notion of the ZPD however, differs from that of Vygotsky because of his focus on systems rather than individual learning.

Artefacts are needed to guide this process which may include any tool, model or concept which help participants visualise and “internalise” (Engeström, 1999, p.34) existing and future practice so that new ways of working and behaving result. Expansive learning therefore also reflects Vygotsky’s emphasis upon language and tool usage as major influences upon human behaviour. More recently Engeström has begun to focus on how learning occurs within or across systems. He suggests that it takes a variety of forms and includes; “horizontal, dialogic and subterranean learning” (Engeström, 2004, p.145). This again has particular relevance for the recent transformation of local authorities in which previously disparate agencies have to learn and work together.

Horizontal and dialogic learning is seen to act as the “visible superstructure” (Engeström, 2004, p.146) to support the change process by developing professional relationships, sometimes across previously disparate boundaries, so that new forms of professional activity are made possible and new working practices introduced. “Subterranean learning” is similar to “horizontal and dialogical learning” in that it is also a necessary element of the change process however, according to Engeström, this is seen as the “invisible, rhizomatic infrastructure of new forms of expansive

learning” (Engeström, 2004a, p. 6) and is therefore much more difficult to control and/or define. It is seen as allowing “practice to take root, sustain them and partially stabilise from the ground up” (Fuller *et al*, 2005, p.152) and in this way depicts learning as fluid, complex and multi-dimensional and rooted within current practice but ultimately shaped by its historical development. Knowledge can therefore be seen as something which is specific, situated and unique within the context that it is developed and so becomes something which is difficult to capture within traditional formal approaches to learning within the workplace. This fluid type of learning however could be seen to be relevant and perhaps even necessary as a large organisation, such as a Council, attempts to transform professional practice throughout its strategic and operational layers: encompassing many thousands of individuals.

## **2.9 Learning in practice**

Engeström’s development of expansive learning comes in response to his perspective on “standard theories of learning” which he considers as being one dimensional and unable to capture this type of learning which is “not stable, not even defined or understood ahead of time” (Engeström, 2001, p.139). He proposes that the traditional theories of learning which portray learning “as vertical processes” in which individuals move “to higher levels of competence” should be replaced by an alternative theory, such as expansive learning, which depicts learning as taking place either “horizontal or sideways” (Engeström, 2001, p.153). Engeström’s assertion reflects CHAT’s perspective on the distributed nature of cognition which sees historically accumulated artefacts as embedded throughout our cultural context and

therefore as acting as potential resources to generate change and transformation. Learning, in this context, cannot be seen to be simply communicated from one individual to another but must be seen as being a part of human experience as individuals participate in their everyday activities.

The concepts proposed above are particularly relevant when we look at the learning and transformation that has been required as a result of the investment post *Every Child Matter's* and later cuts as a result of the coalition government's austerity measures (Biressi and Nunn, 2014; Evans, 2012). The ramifications of these changes have inevitably led to a need to restructure Children's Services for all local authorities (Leadbetter, 2009). This restructure has necessitated a transformation in the way services for children are delivered and has required learning to take place in an unprecedented manner and scale for all those associated with the delivery of public services for children and young people. However, learning on this scale and within this time frame cannot simply happen didactically as in "standard theories of learning" (Engeström, 2001, p.139) but must be seen to take many forms and travel in many different directions and necessitates a theoretical perspective which is able to capture learning in all its manifestations.

Hutchins (1995) has a similar perspective and sees expertise as being distributed throughout an organisation in which different individuals fulfil distinct functions. Expertise of an individual in this sense is demonstrated when they have acquired a broader mastery of the system through a thorough understanding that each individual plays. The notion of distributed expertise has echoes of the cultural historical

perspective and in particular Leont'ev (1978) perspective upon the importance of collective human action as both portray a system in which actors fulfil pre specified roles and functions which benefit the collective whole. However, Hutchins identifies expertise as an understanding of each of these roles evident within the system so that the system itself can be managed effectively. Hutchins (1995) therefore brings the focus back to the individual by identifying an expert as someone who can take overall responsibility for the collective whole.

Engeström portrays “negotiated knotworking” as a method by which connections between different expertise is seen to work in practice. He describes knotworking as a distributed and improvised “orchestration of collaborative performance between loosely connected actors and activity systems” (Engeström, 2004, p.153). “Knotworking” (Engeström, 2004) within this context is a concept which has been developed to capture a new form a work practice which cannot be captured within an activity system (Engeström, 1999). It is shown to have no stable centre, with the knot, which is formed through short lived connections between different professionals, being presented as the focus of analysis. By doing this Engeström presents us with a theoretical perspective which attempts to capture the complexity of new forms of partnership working within Children’s Services which has meaning through the development of “collaborative and transformative expertise” (Engeström, 2004, p.161) through which individual and shared objects (Engeström, 2001) are able to be worked upon.

Gregory Bateson (1972) offers a perspective to learning which has some similarity to Engeström's theory of expansive learning in that he also acknowledges the potential that exists for whole scale transformation. Bateson however, suggests this process of transformation only occurs once the individual has moved from learning based upon knowledge acquisition to the point at which the learner has developed such good understanding of the content and context of their learning environment that she becomes in a position to question the norms that exist. By questioning existing practice in this manner Bateson suggests that the learner is able to challenge the status quo thus giving the potential for transformation.

Bateson, as with Engeström, recognises the active relationship that exists between the learner and the context; however, Bateson focussed his perspective very much on traditional academic views of learning and therefore did not translate examples into the context of work. Both recast the learning process so that it is not depicted as taking place from the teacher and to the learner but is seen to result from an active engagement in the process of learning. In this sense learning is seen as fluid in that it becomes hard to control, manage and predict. It also becomes a process which can be applied to a context outside of a formal teaching environment to one which is much more difficult to delineate. Learning therefore becomes;

“a question of repositioning oneself in relation to aspects of knowledge through changing ones interpretation of contexts and the possibilities for action within them” (Engeström, 2000, p.203).

This process of “repositioning” may be seen to take place through participation with a particular activity and results in the reinterpretation of a task or action. This reinterpretation may help facilitate the changes now demanded within the delivery of Children’s Services and help transform entrenched working practices so that a new approach is developed which promotes the concept of prevention through the formation of multi-agency partnerships and therefore is a process which is of great importance to the success or otherwise of a range of recent government policies and initiatives.

The relationship, in the workplace, between participation and learning is an area which has also been developed by Lave and Wenger (1991). Lave and Wenger present participation as the primary way in which knowledge is passed from one generation of worker to the next, from expert to novice in a subtle process of “learning by peripheral participation” (Lave and Wenger, 1999, p.23) in which all aspects of the professional culture are communicated from older to newer members of the professional community. Lave and Wenger identify a “community of practice”, as a unit of analysis, in which “participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities” (Lave and Wenger, 1999, p.23). They portray an image of practices or professions which are relatively static, stable and cohesive, which are changed generationally through gradual transformations to work practices rather than the much more dynamic approach portrayed by Engeström in which transformation is placed at the heart of the learning process. Lave and Wenger (1991) view novices as existing on the periphery of a community of practice from where they move towards the centre as

they learn and develop established expertise. Because their work is located within forming apprenticeship this viewpoint fails to account for the potential for learning that novices bring to the established professional communities and pays little attention to how this may in turn influence future practice. This is very much different to CHAT where the arrival of a novice or new member within an established professional community could be seen as creating the potential for tension which once articulated could lead to the development of new working practice. Because of their focus on learning established ways of working, Lave and Wenger's ideas are arguably of little value when considering new ways of working in an integrated Children's Service. However, their concept of peripherality may be of use when considering how practitioners work on the edges of forms of practice which are beyond their professional expertise and raises interesting questions around the potential for and implications of partnership working.

Lave and Wenger (1999) therefore present us with a theory of learning which is bounded by notions of professional identity and status and sees learning taking place in one direction and the transformation of practice taking place in a slow and deliberate fashion brought about by generational changes in practice. This is very much at odds within Gee *et al* (1996, p.65) vision of a "new capitalism" which requires the need for new flexible working practices where self-management and the ability to work within a dynamic context in which a range of professionals work together for limited amounts of time on specific projects are essential. Within this environment it therefore becomes increasingly difficult to delineate and map out a stable "community of practice" (1991) in the way as depicted by Lave and Wenger

however, this does not negate the need for a unit of analysis which can capture this new type of professional environment.

Engeström in the development of his work on expansive learning suggests that there is now a “new generation of expertise” which is not stable, “supreme” or individual but has the capacity to “cross boundaries, negotiate and improvise ‘knots’ of collaboration” (Engeström, 2004, p.145) to meet ever changing challenges within the modern workplace. He portrays experts as those individuals who are able to go “beyond” (Engeström, 2004, p.146) their own limitations recognising this ability as the true characteristic of an expert. Here there is the recognition that experts are able to stretch themselves beyond their normal work practice and are therefore able to demonstrate an ability to go beyond what they have previously learnt whilst at the same time engage with the support of others in new forms of collaboration. This type of learning is a much more fluid and dynamic role where the ‘expert’ is able to learn from a variety of different professionals representing a range of different occupations and seems to have resonance to the demands of multi-agency working expected in the post 2004 era of Children’s Services.

## **2.10 Alternative perspectives on the new children’s service environment**

The NCSL could be seen to share Engeström’s view that there is a need for a “new generation of expertise” (Engeström, 2004, p.145) and believed that there needed to be a shift in the way professionals “work, learn and lead together” (National College for School Leadership, 2005, p.3) if the ambitions of the Children’s Act (2004) agenda were to be realised, stating:



“What is clear, from even a cursory glance at the current landscape of public sector reform is that this approach will no longer work for a system which is increasingly networked, inclusive and community orientated” (National College for School Leadership, 2005, p.3)

A network in this context is seen by the NCSL as the result of a sharing of a sense of belonging in which members become bonded aspirationally through “professional superglue” (National College for School Leadership, 2005, p.6) which fosters a common sense of identity and unity in the pursuit of a common goal. Inter-agency networks are seen to necessitate the working together of a range of stakeholders representing a variety of different organisations, agencies and professions in which different rules, division of labour, language and culture co-exist.

Castells (2000) also believes that networks offer significant potential to deliver a new form of working practice. He believes that they allow for the decentralising of control away from traditional hierarchical management structures so that shared decision making can genuinely take place: a feature which lies at the heart of the Children’s Service agenda, post 2004. Castells sees networks, in this respect, as flexible and adaptable without the rigidity offered by a hierarchical management structure which allows them to “co-ordinate functions, and focus resources on specific goals” (Castells, 2000, p.15), a necessary feature for a community specific initiative, such as the Children’s Fund (DfES, 2001) or extended school initiative (Ofsted, 2006) aimed at resolving complex community specific social problems.

Castells however, believes that a network is only capable of sustaining itself for a limited amount of time which is limited to the length it takes to achieve its original goal. He does not believe that “networks” can be routinely transformed from one goal to another. He sees them, instead, as evolving beyond their “programmed goal” (Castells, 2000, p.15) to create a stable entity only when they remain active and dynamic and able to survive the challenges of other competing networks or agendas. Networks are therefore generally considered to be short lived collaborations which offer limited scope for the development of a sustained structure capable of supporting long term transformations. Castell’s (2000) is therefore suggesting that networks are formed when an object is shared by more than one individual who join together to work upon this object and exclude all those whom do not share this common goal. As has been mentioned above this implies that the lifespan of a network is temporary and only capable of achieving limited objectives. However, this does not mean that an individual can only exist within one particular network but may be involved in numerous networks all working upon different objects at the same time.

The spontaneity and limited life span which is associated with the development of work based networks does pose problems for those who currently lead and manage within large complex organisations, with Holland *et al* (2008, p.98) believing that leaders and managers often “assume an ontological coherence to the category of movement ... that is rarely tenable on the ground”. However, despite this seeming lack of coherence leaders and managers can be seen to present a version of reality which both expresses and creates a sense of unity. Holland *et al* (2008) sees this sense of unity as being established through the development of a “collective identity”

which acts as a “dynamic force of change” within an “imagined world” (2008, p.91) where participants of the network share a specific perspective regarding the potential that exists for change.

“Collective identity” (Holland *et al*, 2008, p.91) is seen as having two dimensions: “belonging” and “action”, both of which could have ramifications for organisations wishing to change practice as groups of employees have the ability to connect and form networks as a result of “cognitive, moral and emotional connection” (Holland *et al* 2008, p.99). These groups however, do not always represent a positive change process for the host organisation as they are often associated with the idea of “solidarity” which can oppose the desired transformation of corporate leaders and managers. Action by the members of the identified group is seen by Holland *et al* (2008, p.99) in terms of choices that they make amongst “strategies, tactics, targets, organisational forms and deliberative style” and is identified in their research on “collective identity” (Holland *et al*, 2008, p.91) with those that oppose rather than support governmental policy. Action is therefore seen as the development of a form of “cultural knowledge” which takes place as a result of a continual process of “emerging, forming and reforming” (Holland *et al*, 2010, p.100) so that it is of use and can be used within periods of transformation.

Avis (2010) seems to agree with the stance taken by Holland *et al* (2008) claiming that the production of workplace knowledge is a process of continued change which requires professionals to constantly acquire new skills and by definition new knowledge. He draws on work by Giddens (2002) who believe that the foundations

on which the western economy is based upon requires professionals to continually learn and develop new knowledge while fulfilling their day to day responsibilities at work. However, Avis does draw an interesting distinction between “work based” and “work placed learning” (2010, p.166) with the latter being seen as the type of learning required on a day to day basis to ensure that professionals can fulfil their job roles. Avis suggests that the increasing speed of change in the workplace ensures that a premium is now being put upon “work placed learning”.

## **2.11 Conclusion**

The theoretical and policy context outlined above serves to contextualise the complexity of research which focuses upon professional behaviour. It was therefore essential that much thought and preparation was put into the research process. These methodological research decisions took place over many months and were informed by the theoretical literature presented above. The outcomes of these decisions are presented in the following chapter which offers a rationale for the decisions that were taken regarding research design, data collection, and analysis of the research.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

The study of human behaviour poses many well documented challenges for those choosing this as the focus of their research (Cole, 1996; Kozulin, 1986; Engeström 1999; Lave and Wenger, 1999 and Holland *et al*, 2008). The following chapter presents a review of the key methodological decisions that were taken as the research evolved. It highlights the methodological considerations made during the research and highlights the tensions that exist when applying a complex theoretical perspective into a practical research process.

#### **3.2 The ontological position of the research**

Research is seen by Robson (2011) to be a systematic process which explicitly attempts to contribute to the advancement of knowledge. However, there are many different approaches to research which have different viewpoints as to what does and does not constitute an appropriate methodology. This division goes beyond perspectives as to the actual mechanics of the research process and is primarily concerned with the philosophical standpoint adopted by the researcher in regards of their own personal view of what actually constitutes reality. It is from this standpoint that Bassey (1999) believes researchers will associate themselves with one particular research paradigm over another.

A research paradigm is a network of coherent ideas about the nature of the world and of the functions of research (Bassey, 1999). These ideas are seen to condition

the thinking of researchers who adhere to its principles and therefore underpin their research actions (Cohen *et al*, 2011). Kuhn shares this perspective and sees a research paradigm as “the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques shared by members of a given scientific community” (as cited in Bassey, 1999, p.12). A research paradigm therefore unites a community of scholars by developing an approach to research which creates a shared understanding and agreement in the way in which research can and should be carried out.

The importance of advocating a particular paradigm over another cannot therefore be overstated as each will have a different philosophical perspective as to what does and does not constitute ‘knowledge’ and represents a view of reality which underpins how we see ourselves and the reality in which we live, work and ultimately research. Research therefore allows us to discover what is known and through the articulation and acceptance of this knowledge shape our own conceptions of reality. Without this deeper understanding Pring believes that researchers will “remain unaware of the deeper meaning .... of what they say” (Pring, 2000, p.95): the significance of the findings of research could therefore be lost or left unrealised. This has particular significance for a study, such as this, which focuses upon human behaviour which has implicit difficulties in being defined (Cole, 1996, Kozulin, 1986, Engeström, 1999, Holland *et al*, 2008) captured and analysed.

### **3.3 Methodology: positivism or interpretivism?**

In order to identify the most appropriate methodology for this study, which investigates professional behaviour within a Children’s Service environment, I had to

clarify my own ontological and epistemological perspective so that I could understand the implications of advocating one research paradigm over another. Robson (2011) identifies positivism and constructivism as the two most significant research paradigms.

Positivism presents a view of reality as tangible, existing prior to human perception or interpretation and believes that the realities of the world can be directly captured by 'objective' research. Positivists often represent the 'reality' they study through numerical data from which generalisations can be made and future events and occurrences predicted (Robson, 2011). Bassey (1999) believes that because of this highly structured and ordered approach positivism is not associated with researching human behaviour within a real life context and states that:

"The problem with social and educational research based on a positivist epistemology with its emphasis on the natural sciences is that its ontological assumptions about the nature of the world i.e. that it is orderly, lawful and hence predictable, are highly problematic". (Bassey, 1999, p.14)

Bassey's (1999) stated position is that conflict and instability, rather than regulated order, are the drivers of action and change. The conflictual view of social worlds has its origins (even if the routes are circuitous) in Marx's understanding of society as inherently conflictual. It was to grasp the internal mechanics of conflict and change that Marx (appropriating and inverting Hegel) developed a dialectical methodology (Sayers, 2004). For Marx an understanding of dialectics – symbiosis and interaction - was the necessary basis for a dynamic theory of human history – since, for Marx,

history was constituted by class conflict; the playing out of each epoch's socio-economic contradictions. A dialectical methodology was seen by Marx as necessary for rectifying a dependence on atrophied forms of categorical thinking with Marx's rejecting the "exclusive, rigid, absolute, either/or distractions of analytical thought" The dialectical method insists "that in order to understand the concrete nature of things it is vital to see them in the context of their interconnections with other things within a wider whole for dualistic, concrete and particular things are always and essentially related, connected to and interacting with other things within a larger totality" (Sayers, 2004, p.144).

Within these observations it is possible to see the roots of socio-cultural theory and therefore cultural historical activity theory. These theoretical approaches recognise the interconnectivity of place, time and action – and the need to develop a methodology which captures these connections. As discussed in Chapter Two, Engeström (1999) has attempted this through the introduction of the concepts of historicity and multi-voicedness, in order to articulate competing voices within the activity system and surface the contradictions and tensions which have the potential to transform the behaviour of those involved in their shared activity.

I share the concern about approaches that treat everyday workplace behaviour, which is the focus of this study, as something that can be portrayed as objective and rational. By contrast, socio-cultural approaches see human behaviour, and therefore professional practice, as idiosyncratic with individual action being influenced by the moment to moment interaction of individuals with their environmental context



(Kozulin, 1986). Within a highly complex work environment, such as a Council, it is therefore very difficult to make any observations which are either predictable or replicable and it is a world within which no obvious order is evident. Although I have adopted a rigorous and systematic approach to data collection and analysis, the findings of the interviews are, in one sense, subjective and are not open to generalisation in the way that is advocated by positivists (Cohen *et al*, 2011). It therefore seems that the underlying principles of positivism conflict with both my view of reality together with the aim and objectives of my chosen research area and for this reason I look to constructivism (also referred to as interpretivism) as a paradigm which offers an appropriate epistemological and ontological context within which my research can be positioned.

Bassey states that interpretivism “cannot accept the idea of there being a reality ‘out there’ which exists irrespective of people” (Bassey, 1999, p.13). Interpretivists, unlike positivists, accept that idiosyncratic views of reality exist which cannot be generalised or represented simply through numerical data. This individualistic interpretation upon events is central to this research which focuses data collection upon the professional experiences of a number of Children’s Service practitioners and accepts that different interpretations of events are not only likely but inevitable. However, by adopting an interpretivist approach it is possible through language; ideas and perspectives derived from interviews can be shared and through active negotiation a reality be created which allows for the uniqueness of individuals to be taken into consideration and be represented. In this way interpretivism questions the concept of ‘rationality’

as advocated by positivists and places hermenutics and reflexivity at the heart of its approach (Alvesson and Skolberg, 2009).

Interpretivism reassesses the role of research from one of creating laws and generalisations to one that is more concerned with interpretation, meaning and illumination. In this way it is seen to be better placed than positivism to study the intricacies of professional behaviour. However interpretivism is often criticised for its methods, which can be seen to lack rigour, often producing findings that are invalid (Robson, 2011; Cohen *et al*, 2011). However, this criticism generally comes from those who advocate a positivist perspective which aims at uncovering ‘the truth’ from which knowledge is acquired and generated. In contrast to this type of Positivist approach; interpretivism actually celebrates new approaches to research, such as those advocated by CHAT, which are seen as flexible and able to reflect the culturally specific nature of knowledge production in a way that “assumes that all human action is meaningful and hence has to be interpreted and understood within the context of social practices” (Bassey, 1996, p.18).

Knowledge formation for interpretivists is therefore seen as “circular, iterative, spiral” (Bassey, 1999, p.19) rather than predictable, replicable and linear as is evident within the positivist paradigm. Interpretation of specific phenomena, such as professional practice, is therefore seen to depend on a whole variety of contextual factors and the understanding of these variables which underlie human behaviour can be seen as the ‘life blood’ of interpretivist research. An example of this could be seen when analysing a simple human action such as raising an arm. This only makes sense if

we understand various contextual and cultural factors within which this action too place. Therefore this action would have a different meaning within a school lesson than it would have when watching a football match or during a protest march. Research of human behaviour should therefore not attempt to minimise the effects that the context has upon behaviour but instead should recognise the importance that these variables have for our understanding of the actions of people within everyday social contexts.

This type of approach is evident within the interpretivist paradigm where the researcher becomes an active agent within the research context (Robson, 2011) and is involved in the active interpretation of the observed phenomena rather than as a passive disseminator of information; who is seen to exist separate to the research. However, the subjective nature of interpretivism means that it is prone to bias as it places emphasis upon the skills of the researcher both in terms of data collection, interpretation and presentation. This is certainly true within this thesis as I have worked within the local authority being studied and alongside all the participants of the research. The type and use of language is therefore very important and can and does have an influence upon the quality and validity of the research and its associated findings.

The need for interpretation within educational based research can be seen when studying phenomena within Children's Services which are created within a specific cultural, social and historic context. Rules and conventions which exist within these are therefore unique to each particular setting. Professional behaviour within these

settings will be affected by these unique variables which need to be identified if we are to really offer a true reflection of what is occurring within a school based context.

Positivism has less potential for understanding professional behaviour in context and can be seen to oversimplify. Interpretivist research caters for this complexity and allows the researcher to tease out meaning from the phenomena which is being studied and illuminates rather than imposes an oversimplified explanation regarding certain phenomena (Cohen *et al*, 2011). Despite an inability to draw generalisations from this type of interpretivist research, due to the uniqueness of people and interactions that take place, there is a large amount of commonality which if uncovered through research can be useful when applied to other situations and settings; this might be described as a potential for analytic (rather than statistical) generalisation.

### **3.4 The Research Design: a comparative case study**

It is the aim of this study to “seek new insights” (Robson, 2002, p.81) into how Children’s Services and associated professional roles evolve as a result of government policy. This study is rooted within a real life context so that a genuine portrayal of the issues which support and impede the successful implementation of government policy are captured and better understood.

Yin (2009) suggests that a case study is a suitable design for research like this which involves “an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context”. De Vaus endorses these claims and states that; “Case study

designs are particularly useful when we do not wish or are unable to screen out the influence of 'external' variables but when we wish to examine their effect on the phenomenon we are investigating" (De Vaus, 2001, p.42). The fact that case studies focus upon a 'real life context' where the researcher has little or no control (Cohen *et al*, 2011) has genuine relevance to the aims of my research. It is also a research design, which compares positively to the other types of design that could have been adopted. This is certainly evident within an experimental design, which endeavours to "control and manipulate the conditions which determine the events in which they are interested" (Cohen *et al*, 1994, p.164) and therefore does not allow the researcher to gain a true understanding of the conditions and processes, which shape or are shaped by the reality of the context of Children's Services.

A survey design can endeavour to uncover this type of reality however, its focus is upon gathering cross-sectional data at a particular point in time (Cohen *et al*, 2011) and it therefore would not allow me to map out the complexity of an evolving working community, over a period of time, in the detail that I require. This required detail could, perhaps, have necessitated an ethnographic design as it would allow for both the flexibility and focus that I was looking for and is also a design, which stresses the merits of a non-experimental context. However, I was not in a position where I was able to immerse myself within the culture of the community being studied (Cohen *et al*, 2011), due to my changing professional responsibilities.

The decision to adopt a flexible case study design is further supported by my decision not to pre-specify or pre-determine the exact content and form of my

research prior to its undertaking and highlights Robson's assertion (2002, p.81) that this "almost exclusively" (2002, p.81) leaves little option but to follow a flexible design. This decision to adopt a non-experimental flexible case study design inevitably has implications upon the potential validity of the research. This however, does not imply that the project becomes redundant simply because it is as case study; it simply stresses the responsibility that I had to develop a methodology, which ensures that the findings are as valid and reliable as is possible. The way in which I have tried to increase the validity of this research is discussed in section 3.7.

As has been previously mentioned my study is located within one local authority in the West Midlands region of England. This particular authority employed over four thousand people when the research started there was therefore a need to establish the bounds of my particular case study within the context of this authority. I needed to select a sample that reflected the diverse range of practitioners that worked with children and young people under the new Children's Trust arrangements. I also wanted to select a balance of practitioners from both strategic and operational roles. I eventually decided to use the Children's Fund Management Board to delineate my case as this was made up of professionals who worked for a variety of different agencies and Council portfolios; including senior strategic managers and those in operational roles. After seeking permission for their participation I was left with nine participants. The job roles (rather than job titles) of the participants in both phases of the research are listed in table 1 below.

**Table 1: research participants**

| <b>2004</b>                            | <b>2012</b>                                       |
|--|---|
| Director of Voluntary Services         | Director of the Council for Voluntary Services    |
| Head of Integrated Children's Services | Assistant Director for Children's Services        |
| Head of Children's Social Care         | Senior Manager for specialist Children's Services |
| Primary Headteacher                    | Primary Headteacher                               |
| Member of the Children's Arts team     | Member of the Children's Arts team                |
| Breakfast Club Coordinator             | Study Support Manager                             |
| Looked after Children's Worker         | Integrated Service Manager                        |
| Children's Participation Worker        | Leisure Facilities Manager                        |
| Youth and Community Worker             | Youth and Community Worker                        |

Phase two of the data collection took place eight years after phase one and although ideally I would have liked to interview the same participants only four of the original nine were still employed by the Council. I therefore selected practitioners that I felt were the closest match to the job roles I had interviewed in phase one of the data collection.

### **3.5 Data collection instruments**

Regardless of the research design that has been chosen the quality of the research findings largely depend upon the nature and quality of the data collection instruments that are used. Denscombe believes that interviews are most appropriate when they are "applied to the exploration of more complex and subtle phenomena" (Denscombe, 2010, p.173) such as "people's opinions, feelings, emotions and experiences". As a data collection instrument they therefore seem highly suited to this case study which endeavours to discover the impact that the change agendas in 2004 and 2012 has had upon individual and collective practice.

The semi-structured interviews were undertaken with eighteen individual stakeholders (Nine within both phases of the research) and involved individuals who worked within the Children's Service environment. Mason (2002) believes that semi-structured interviews offer the best approach for situations whereby the researcher encourages the interviewees to "develop unexpected themes" (2002, p.62) which the interviewee is unaware and she believes that in order to best facilitate this questions should be flexible, informal and fluid. The interview schedule used categories evident within an activity system (Engeström, 1999) to help structure the interview and also allowed for an appropriate comparison of findings within and across both phases. An activity system and its associated categories are presented in figure 2 (Page 35).

As mentioned in the previous chapter an activity system identifies six categories which influence the actions and behaviour of individuals within a given context (Engeström, 1999) and can be used as a unit of analysis for the study of collective behaviour which again is particularly pertinent to my particular area of research. As a unit of analysis an activity system is a complex concept as it is not fixed or quantifiable and can and does have different interpretations depending upon the scale of the phenomena under investigation. For the sake of this study I have interpreted the activity system through the eyes of the interviewee and therefore placed them and their role as the subject of each of their respective activity system. All other categories relate to their specific role. I have therefore endeavoured not to depict Children's Services as an overall activity system and have not tried to fit the interviewee's observations within my interpretation of their professional context. In



this way I hope to maintain consistency in my analysis of the transcripts and interpretation of the findings.

### **3.6 Data trail: coding and questions**

Although the activity system categories do attempt to simplify the complex process of understanding individual and collective human behaviour it is far from clear from the work of Engeström as to how best it is to use these categories to aid data collection. After considerable thought and reflection I decided to use these categories to help structure my interview schedule and then analysis of data collected. In short I simply interpreted these categories as 'codes', which Robson (2011) believes help simplify the analysis of unstructured complex material.

A code from Cohen *et al's* (2011) perspective is a label that is given to a particular piece of text which could be seen as the "translation of question responses and respondent information to specific categories for the purpose of analysis" (2011, p.559). It reduces the volume of data to manageable portions by organising and placing it into categories which have generally, but not always, been identified prior to data analysis. In so doing it allowed me to be able to identify similarities and contradictions evident between and within each phase of the research so that I could draw conclusions from the collected data. The relationship between the codes used and questions asked within the interviews is presented below.

**Table 2: Codes related to interview questions**

| <b>CHAT category/Code</b>                | <b>Question</b>   |
|--|---|
| Subject                                  | Could you please describe your current role?  |
| Object, Rules                            | What is its core purpose? What are the written/unwritten rules?   |
| Outcome                                  | How do you know if you have been successful in your role?   |
| Tools/Rules/Community/Division of Labour | What factors/things help you to do your job? Can you give examples?   |
| Tools/Rules/Community/Division of Labour | What factors/things prevent you from doing your job? Can you give examples?   |
| Community/Division of Labour             | Who do you work most closely with? (Person/organisation). Are there any agencies that you have very little involvement with? (That you think you should have) |
| All categories                           | How has your job/role changed over the last 10 years – what have been the causes of this?   |
| Outcome                                  | Every Child Matter's set out to change practice. Did it work?   |
| All categories                           | How would you describe Children's Services in 2012?   |
| Tools                                    | What 5 skills do you need to do your job?   |

To accompany the findings from the semi-structured interviews I felt that I needed another data collection instrument in order to triangulate the findings that were becoming evident from the initial analysis of the 2004 data. Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009) believe that triangulation of this type through the use of more than one data collection method allows researchers “to better determine a particular phenomenon” and so I introduced a brief questionnaire to the second phase of my study. This questionnaire (Appendix 1) allowed the interviewees in 2012 to reflect back upon statements that were made by their peers in 2004. The questionnaire made use of Likert scales (Cohen *et al*, 2011) and asked the participants to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with each of the statements thereby allowing participants more latitude in their response which facilitated a more weighted response to the

significance of change evident. The responses to this created a quick and effective way to see if the attitudes and beliefs of professionals had changed over the intervening years and also allowed for triangulation with the comments that they had made during the interviews.

### **3.7 Claiming validity within interpretive research**

Robson (2011) believes that in order for any enquiry to be of any significance it must demonstrate that the research has validity. Lincoln and Guba (1985) feel that the term validity has positivistic overtones and substitute it with 'trustworthy' which is concerned with the relationship between the findings and the claims that the research make. In short it is about ensuring the findings demonstrate what they claim to demonstrate. This is particularly challenging for a case study design which has historically been considered a soft option; with some academics suggesting that it has more to do with the literacy skills of the researcher than the rigour of the research process (Yin, 2009). Attempts made to achieve validity are presented below.

#### **3.7.1 Selecting an appropriate design**

To ensure validity Yin (2009) believes that the researcher must; develop an appropriate design, select appropriate research instruments and ensure that the analysis and dissemination of findings is conducted in a logical and theoretically sound manner. Mason (2002) supports Yin's perspective and suggests that in order for a researcher's interpretation of events to have validity there must be a clear and detailed audit trail within the project, which outlines the type and manner in which the

data was collected. This allows the reader to gauge the authenticity of interpretation presented. Table 3 demonstrates the systematic way that I have constructed this study and demonstrates a rigorous and robust audit trail of data that I have collected: which links the theory which underpins this enquiry, to the findings that I present within Chapters: Four, Five and Six.

### **3.7.2 Piloting prior to research**

Piloting the methods of data collection prior to undertaking the research proper is also seen to have a significant impact upon the validity of the research (Cohen *et al*, 2011). The piloting of the semi structured interview schedule was carried out by a number of colleagues that were working on the National Evaluation of the Children's Fund and were particularly knowledgeable and experienced researchers. Their advice proved invaluable and helped me simplify many aspects of my research aims and data collection instruments. It also helped me develop a more relaxed approach to interviewing which I feel created a more conducive environment for the interviewees to share their beliefs, feelings and perceptions.

One specific outcome of the piloting process was regarding the order of the questions within the interview schedule (Appendix 2) which only seemed to make sense to the interviewee if I started with the *object* of their work and then proceeded to work around the other activity system categories. It was also as a result of piloting that I decided to adopt a semi structured interview schedule, as the interview seemed to progress better when I responded to the interviewee answers rather than simply focus upon a specific sequence of questions. The interview questions therefore

acted as prompts to ensure that all categories of the activity system had been covered with the interviewee being given the freedom to discuss their work in a manner which made sense to them. During the interviews I ensured that I paid full attention to the responses of the interviewees and took no notes. I also ensured that I gave verbal and non-verbal responses that were appropriate and kept my own involvement in the interview to an absolute minimum.

A change in career meant that data collected in 2004 remained dormant until 2011 when I re-instigated my research and decided to make use of the data collected in 2004 and re-use the format and structure of the schedule that I had piloted in 2003.

### **3.7.3 Identifying an appropriate sample**

As with any type of research the selection of the sample (Cohen *et al*, 2011) will also inevitably have a significant effect upon the reliability of the research findings. The Children's Fund management board was selected as a suitable sample for this study as it had representation from across all the relevant agencies and departments within the local authority. This board therefore gave me the spread of professionals that I was looking for and also identified practitioners which were central to the changing agenda of the time. I used the same sampling strategy for phase two of the research and although the Children's Fund management board no longer existed, I endeavoured to interview the same practitioners that I had in 2004 however, this was only possible in four cases: for the remainder of the sample I selected roles that mostly closely matched those that I had interviewed in 2004.

#### **3.7.4 Developing an analytical framework**

It is worth noting at this stage that the potential problems identified above, in regards of the validity and reliability within a flexible design, are seen by De Vaus (2001) as being counter balanced by the potential benefits of being actively involved with the setting that is being researched and in the detailed idiographic explanations and insight that can be gained from an in depth study such as this. However, the close professional relationship that I have had and continue to have, with the participants of the research does raise issues around researcher bias and reflexivity (Robson, 2002); issues that I feel can be counterbalanced by adopting a coherent and robust approach to data analysis which I have outlined in Table 2. I also believe that the knowledge I have gained during the six years spent working within Children's Services allows me to fully appreciate the wider implications of the findings of the interview transcripts. I feel that this allows me to make connections and see patterns which otherwise may have been lost or misunderstood. However, the analysis of findings has not centred on my own observations and does adopt a robust theoretical position.

Yin (2009, p.130) believes that case study based data analysis is the "least developed and most difficult" aspect of interpretivist research and claims that in many projects little thought is put into it prior to the research being undertaken. He believes that the experienced researcher realises the inherent problems with this approach and will develop an appropriate analytical framework prior to data collection being undertaken and offers advice by suggesting that there are four general strategies which could be followed by a researcher undertaking a case study based

research project. I have aligned my research to Yin's first strategy which he calls "relying on theoretical propositions" (2009, p.131) in which he suggests that analysis should follow on from the research design which develops from the theoretical standpoint of the research. In this situation the analysis develops organically from the aims, objectives and theoretical perspective that the research is located.

As has been discussed in some depth already this research is informed by the Engeström's concept of an activity theory (Engestrom, 2000). However, my decision to select CHAT as the analytical framework for the research was taken after consideration of a number of alternate theoretical approaches. As I was attempting to investigate how professional behaviour was transformed following a changing national and local policy context a Piagetian perspective was never going to be a suitable theoretical approach due to its focus upon 'the child' rather than the context in which learning took place (Penn, 2005). The same was also true for behaviourist theories (Olson and Hergenhahn, 2009) which failed to capture the dialogic complexity and, vitally, the mediated nature of the learning process within a large organisational context. Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, however, did present a model which identified the "layers of influence" (Penn, 2005, p. 44) that affect how individuals learn and develop however the theoretical approach seemed "too wide and operated at too many levels to be testable" (Penn, 2005, p. 44). As a self-acknowledged positivist (Penn, 2005); Bronfenbrenner's was also at odds with my own epistemological position as discussed in section 3.2. I also considered using organisational learning theories (Easterby-Smith *et al*, 1999) to inform the analysis of data; however, when researching these it became evident that the theoretical

approaches were too generic and failed to acknowledge the role of the individual within the organisational context (Boreham and Morgan, 2004) and is seen by Engestrom as being “typically weak in spelling out the specific processes or actions that make the learning process” (Engestrom, 2001, p.150). I therefore turned my attention towards sociocultural theories of learning which highlight the central role of mediated interaction between people within the workplace (Hopwood, 2010); a central feature of this thesis and as a result I have incorporated a number of different theoretical approaches which include the work of; Engestrom (1991, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2004, 2004 and 2005), Holland *et al* (2008), Lave and Wenger (1999), and Vygotsky (1967).

### **3.7.5 Analysis of data**

The analysis of the interview transcripts is presented in chapters four and five with each of these chapters following the same structure (based upon the analysis templates presented in Appendix 3) which presents a systematic and structured approach to the analysis of the interviews. Data analysis started by reading through the interview transcripts in order to get a broad understanding of the interviewee’s job role. I then re-read the transcripts and used colours to highlight sections of the text that I interpreted as being connected to each of the seven CHAT categories. Once I had colour coded each of the transcripts I was then able to review and edit some of my interpretations and coding. This required me to develop a reflexive approach and revisit articles around CHAT to ensure that I was consistent with my analysis and application of codes. This process took considerably longer than I had previously thought and also challenged my theoretical understanding of CHAT. It forced me to



thoroughly engage with the subject in a manner that I had previously not, despite feeling that I had, and made me question not only my perspective upon my choice of coding but also its suitability as a data collection instrument.

Primary amongst these concerns was the duality that existed in some of the statements' which could potentially have been linked to any number of codes. One of the most obvious examples of this can be seen in areas where the interviewee discussed perceived changes in how the Council functions. This could therefore have been coded as a discussion around either the rules or the object of their work or even an aspect of division of labour. I decided to resolve this apparent confusion by adopting a consistent perspective towards the analysis of the interviews by choosing to analyse the transcripts through the perspective of the interviewee rather than the position of the researcher. Thus enabling a consistency of application and interpretation.

Another area of potential criticism focuses upon the definition of what constitutes an incident/occurrence within the transcript and the extent that these are comparable to each other. For example, an interviewee may refer, in passing, to a group that they chair. This reference may then be coded as a reference to subject however, this may then be followed by a long and detailed description of the rules that this group follow. This extended section is only awarded as a single occurrence and only has the same weighting as the previous passing reference. My resolution of this inequity eventually was relatively simple and concerned the relative importance that I placed upon the frequency graphs which, do not play a central role within the data analysis, but simply

give an indication of the distribution of coding within each of the interviews prior to further and much more detailed analysis of the interview transcripts.

Once I was satisfied that I had completed the analysis to the best of my ability I then totalled up the number of responses within each of the specific codes and presented it in the form of a distribution graph. I was initially sceptical as to the usefulness of presenting data graphically however, after undertaking the entire research process and after reviewing the graphs produced I now see the value in both the process that was undertaken together with the graphs that were produced. This was because of the theoretical insight that it provided together with the trends and patterns that became evident which during the interviews I had not been aware of.

Following these initial stages of data analysis I then reviewed the transcripts to identify firstly the features of the activity system within which the interviewee was located and then identified any tensions or contradictions which were seen to exist within the same activity systems and which could be seen to be preventing the interviewee achieve their desired outcomes. Once these four different aspects of analysis had been undertaken (i.e. Summary of role, frequency of codes, features of the activity systems and contradictions and tensions evident) I populated a template (see Appendix 3) which was used for each interview and once all interviews had been analysed I developed a summative template which combined the findings of all the interviews/templates for each of the two phases of the research; which I then used to compare and contrast the findings of interviews undertaken in 2004 (phase one) with the findings of the interviews undertaken in 2012 (phase two).

### **3.8 Research structure: a quasi-longitudinal study**

As has been mentioned above the research presented within this enquiry has two distinct phases of data collection. The first phase took place in 2004 and the second phase took place in 2012. The eight year gap between these two phases of data collection creates a quasi-longitudinal and comparative aspect to the research in that it compares professional behaviour across two dates rather than following its development over an eight year period. This comparison allows for an understanding of how professional practice has changed but does not focus upon a detailed analysis of the change process that would be evident in a longitudinal study.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the minimum unit for analysis in activity theory is an activity system (Engeström, 1999). An activity system is presented in Figure 2 and is constructed from six different categories which influence collective human behaviour within any given context. I have interpreted these categories to act as codes (Cohen *et al*, 20011) and have used these not only to structure the interview schedule, which I used within all interviews, but have also used these to structure the analysis of the interview transcripts and the presentation of findings evident in Chapter's Four, Five and Six. The CHAT categories therefore act as an analytic framework through which to connect all stages and aspects of the research process. It therefore facilitates a clear audit trail from data collection through to collection and presentation of findings.

The process identified above is presented in Table 3 below and highlights, retrospectively, the different stages of the research. The table identifies the critical

stages that I, as the researcher, moved through as my initial research ideas evolved into the research study which is presented within this thesis. The table is split into two phases which sit either side of a period in which my research was suspended due to an increase in work commitments.

**Table 3: The research process**

| <b>Stage</b>              | <b>Key elements of the research 'Journey'</b>  |
|---------------------------|--|
| 'Phase one':<br>Stage 1   | Initial interest following the introduction of the 1989 Education Act and different reactions of primary and secondary colleagues.   |
| Stage 2                   | Focus of the research identified as the impact of the 2004 Children Act upon Children's Service practitioners and the lives of children, young people and their families.  |
| Stage 3                   | Consideration of research design. Research into related theoretical and analytical frameworks.   |
| Stage 4                   | Selection of a case study research design together with CHAT as theoretical construct and analytical framework for the research. Decision made to focus research upon professional behaviour and omit the impact upon children, young people and their families. |
| Stage 5                   | Interview selected as primary DCM and Children's Fund Management Board selected as source of data collection due to distribution of practitioners both in terms of operational/strategic positions together with range of agencies represented.                  |
| Stage 6                   | Research participants recruited and interview schedules developed around activity system categories.   |
| Stage 7                   | Nine interviews undertaken in 2004 with practitioners from Children's Fund Management Board (Table 1).   |
| <i>Research suspended</i> |  |
| 'Phase two':<br>Stage 8   | Research resurrected in 2009. Decision made to develop a quasi-longitudinal research design in order to compare practitioner behaviour between 2004 and 2012 in attempt to learn lessons for future practice.  |
| Stage 9                   | Second sample identified from practitioners within the same local authority as in phase one of the research reflecting a similar spread of professions including four of the original 2004   |

|          |   |
|----------|---|
|          | sample.   |
| Stage 10 | Interviews undertaken in 2012 (Table 1).  |
| Stage 11 | Interviews analysed and presented using CHAT as analytical framework. Comparisons made using activity system categories between and within the two phases of the research to identify similarities and differences. |

### 3.9 Ethical considerations

Bassey (1999) stresses the need for ethical considerations to be evident throughout the research process and identifies; respect for democracy, respect for truth and respect for persons, as something that the researcher must ensure within their research. Consideration of this type is also highlighted by the British Educational Research Association: *Ethical Guidelines* (2012) and, although there are no aspects of the research, which are seen as ethically sensitive, it remained important to ensure that throughout the course of the study strict ethical principles were adhered to.

Each participant was therefore informed about the purpose and reasons for study and consent gained prior to participation in the research. Information was initially forwarded via email which I then followed up with a telephone call once they had replied stating that they were happy to take part. I was particularly sensitive to the fact that I had worked previously with all interviewees and although this created a pleasant and relaxed atmosphere in which to undertake the interviews I felt an added responsibility to ensure that no harmful data has been used which identifies any individual either directly, by implication or assertion and have therefore only given the generic job role rather than specific job title.

Interviewees were offered the right to withdraw at any point and this right was taken up by two participants who had initially said that they were happy to take part. At no point did the participants feel under any pressure and I made efforts to ensure that the interviews were undertaken in a conversational manner. In fact this was done so successfully that virtually all participants stated that this type of research was needed and that they felt that it had also been a cathartic experience.

### **3.10 Conclusion**

The next chapter is the first of three analysis chapters which present the collective findings of each phase of the research. Chapter 4 presents the findings of all interviews undertaken in 2004 and is structured using the following headings; frequency of codes, features of the activity system, contradictions and tensions and finally concluding with theoretical reflections as to how the findings compare and contrast to the theory presented within Chapter Two. Chapter Five repeats this structure but presents the findings of the interviews undertaken eight years later in 2012. Finally Chapter Six compares and contrasts the summative findings of 2004 and 2012 and attempts to identify the factors that have had the most significant impact upon professional behaviour before drawing conclusions upon all aspects of the research in Chapter Seven..

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **ANALYSIS OF TRANSCRIPTS (2004)**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

The following chapter moves the thesis forward by presenting a detailed review of professional behaviour in 2004 and by doing so provides an intimate socio-cultural portrayal of professional practice shortly after the introduction of the 2004 Children Act. The findings from the analysis of the interviews presented within this chapter create a baseline from which a comparison can be made with practice in 2012; which is presented in Chapters Five and Six respectively.

The year 2004 can be looked back on as a unique time in the history of Children's Services during which the economy was booming and public sector investment was at an all-time high (Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and young people's services, 2010). However, instead of being an era of optimism and innovation, in which multi-agency working was transforming the Children's Service arena, we are presented here with a picture of fragmentation and individual interpretation and negotiation of new working arrangements as practitioners became attuned to the rhetoric of the 2004 Children Act and in particular the ambitions of the Every Child Matters agenda and its associated 'Five Outcomes' (See Chapter 2.2 of this thesis).

The interviews which were undertaken in 2004 encouraged the research participants to reflect upon their own practice and their own experiences rather than speculate upon the potential ramifications of the new legislation; the findings are therefore

based upon the reality of professional practice. The interviewees had all been members of the Children's Fund Management Board when it had been set up in 2002 and included:

- Three senior strategic managers within education, social care and the voluntary sector.
- A primary school headteacher.
- An art worker.
- A breakfast club coordinator.
- A looked after children's worker.
- A children's participation worker.
- A youth and community worker.

As discussed in Chapter Three, CHAT has been used to underpin the analysis of the interview transcripts and as a result this chapter has been structured around its key theoretical concepts and principles. The current chapter therefore starts with a brief analysis of the frequency that the CHAT categories were referred to during the interviews and is followed by an exploration of the significance that these categories play in the professional lives of the research participants. Once each code has been discussed I then devote some time to identifying the key tensions and contradictions that are apparent in the Children's Service activity system; which Engeström (1999) would view as potential drivers for change and transformation. The chapter ends with a reflection on the interview findings in an attempt to clarify and challenge some of the theoretical positions presented within chapter two of this study.



## 4.2 Frequency of Codes evident within interview transcripts

**Table 4. Frequency of codes (2004)**

| %                  | Subject | Object | Tools | Rules | D.of.L | Community | Outcomes |
|--------------------|---------|--------|-------|-------|--------|-----------|----------|
| <b>Total</b>       | 3       | 18     | 11    | 25    | 19     | 13        | 13       |
| <b>Strategic</b>   | 2       | 24     | 8     | 26    | 25     | 9         | 7        |
| <b>Operational</b> | 4       | 15     | 12    | 24    | 16     | 14        | 15       |

In interpretivist research it is important to create data trails that help provide a warrant for claims made by the researcher. The table above shows the percentage of interviewee responses that were coded using the activity system categories. The results are presented as a total of all responses and are divided into strategic and operational positions. The results show that interviewees, in both operational and strategic roles, make little reference to the subject of their work during the interviews and instead spent the majority of the interview discussing; object, rules and division of labour. The interviewees seem preoccupied with the current focus of their roles together with how this work is to be done and by whom; other categories within their respective activity system are referred to much less frequently with only 15% of responses referring to the tools that they use as part of their professional roles and the outcomes that have been achieved as part of their work. Interviewees therefore spend little time talking about how their ambitions are going to be achieved and what their desired outcomes are; which perhaps highlights a certain degree of uncertainty as to the practicalities of the new Children's Trust arrangements.

The responses of those in strategic roles is different from those who fulfil operational positions with the coding for operational roles reflecting a much more even spread of discussion across all aspects of their respective activity system. Although reference to subject is limited, all other categories apart from rules are located within a 4% range, which may reflect more of an all-round awareness, by those in operational positions, of the issues that exist when implementing specific initiatives and services. However, despite this difference, one quarter of all coding for both strategic and operational interviewees was dedicated to discussing the rules that they have to follow and highlights the significance that stakeholders place in how they must work; perhaps highlighting the bureaucratic environment within which they function.

This brief review of the distribution of coding provides for an initial indication of the focus of the interviewees behaviour. We now move on to look at each of the activity system categories in much more detail in order to gain some understanding as to why attention is distributed in the manner that it is. In other words we start to get a detailed understanding as to why practitioners behave in the manner that they do.

### **4.3 Interpretations of the Subject**

Engeström (2001) presents the subject as the lens through which the activity system is viewed. However, the identification of the subject within the interview transcripts proved trickier than I had initially imagined. This seemed to be due to the newness of the newly formed Integrated Children's Service together with the complexity that had arisen as a result of the significant investment that had taken place. Multiple versions of the subject therefore seemed to be evident.

The subject was interpreted by most interviewees as being the recently formed Children's Trust arrangements, which linked all statutory and non-statutory agencies, to create a highly complex working environment. However, none of the interviewees, including those within senior strategic positions, really understood what this might actually mean in a practical sense. The interviewees viewed the subject as the specific roles they fulfilled together with the agency within which they are located. This confusion is highlighted in the following transcript which is taken from the senior strategic manager overseeing the development of joint working arrangements between; education, health and social care.

*"the PCT has its own Director of Children's Services and up until now it's not even catered for within the bill. Health is actually separate and that's we've actually been very concerned about here and still are that although you bring through the bill education and social care together it doesn't bring connection to the police, the PCT under that same umbrella". (Head of Integrated Children's Services, 2004)*

This individual interpretation of the subject was seen to result in a "spaghetti like" structure in which no coherence is evident. As a result, confusion exists whereby they are unsure as to the implications of the new working arrangements that are being created. The subject is therefore individually created and individually interpreted and defined and is somewhat different to the ambitions of the 2004 Children Act which promise a new joined up approach to the management and

delivery of services for children. The same senior manager acknowledges this confusion.

*“No, that’s because the children and persons strategic partnerships and its sub-groups is really metamorphosing itself so that we can mainstream all of these project groups that are all over the place into that one planning structure”. (Head of Integrated Children’s Services, 2004)*

This is certainly evident within the interview with the primary headteacher, who had until recently no knowledge of the new local authority structures and only became aware of these through the introduction of a breakfast club at her school which was funded by the Children’s Fund (DfES, 2001). This involvement with the breakfast club introduced the headteacher to a number of partner agencies that she previously had not known and demonstrates the active nature of the learning (cf. Vygotsky, 1978) involved within the transformation of Children’s Services.

As a result of the insular approach to working, it is difficult to identify any uniform understanding of the subject with no single identity linking all the stakeholders as was the government’s ambition. Each interviewee could therefore be seen to exist within a particular context which has been created through their particular area of interest and responsibility and could be seen to support Edwards’ (2004) assertion that new multi-agency models of working would necessitate significant organisational learning prior to them being embedded into everyday working practice. Activity systems

therefore relate to individual interviewees rather than across the entire Children's Trust.

#### **4.4 Interpretations of the Object**

The 2004 Children Act introduced three principles by which work within Children's Services was ideally to be orientated. These were: the prevention of need through the universal provision of services, the development of multi-agency partnerships so that a holistic approach to the provision of services could be achieved and the participation of children and young people in the planning and commissioning of new services. This move towards prevention is viewed positively by those interviewed and is seen as an opportunity to move from a reactive to a proactive strategy. This is highlighted in the section below which is taken from an interview with the Head of Children's Social Care.

*"I just I think now, you know, people can't ignore it any more really I think, from a national level prevention over the last two no, perhaps eighteen months, has just become much more to the fore. Prevention, you know, across a number of services; my own, health, social services, local authority; prevention as a whole area is just much more seen as being productive, and looking at trying to improve ways of delivering really, because I think well I would hope that people come to the realisation that, you know, we can't constantly be in crises all the time or making services so crises led, we need to put steps in place beforehand, to make sure that people don't get into a crisis situation."*  
*(Head of Children's Social Care, 2004)*

This shift to a preventative approach is viewed by the senior manager in charge of Children's Social Care as requiring a change in philosophy rather than simply providing a range of services and suggests that perhaps more time should be devoted to creating opportunities to share a new strategic philosophy rather than in commissioning new services; with the same strategic manager stating:

*"I think the other thing that we felt very strongly was that it's not a great deal of money so you can't mend the world with it in terms of buying things or building things. What we're trying to do is to change people's way of working and to change that kind of philosophy, so that people worked together, so that they worked with the community, and so that they're looking at how they work. And hoping that some of the change we could affect would be in that kind of area really, in that kind of philosophy and the way in which services were deliver".*  
(Head of Children's Social Care, 2004)

The senior strategic managers interviewed have only recently been appointed to the new Children's Service portfolio: the focus of all interviewees is therefore largely concerned with trying to make sense of the new professional environment within which they now work; with one senior manager asking the question: *"where do you start with these things?"* Because of this senior managers are also trying to develop coherent internal structures which attempt to support and coordinate all of those working within Children's Services so that so that *"3 legged rocking horses"* are not created. This delay between policy introduction and policy implementation seems to resonate with Vygotsky's (Kozulin, 1986) belief that language, in this case

communicated through government policy, needs to be internalised and understood prior to it transforming human behaviour.

There is also interest, by the lead officer for Children's Social Care, in how learning from new projects can be fed into the wider Children's Trust:

*"Well, I think, you know, there will be a lot of learning that we can put back into how mainstream services ... but we've got to really start looking at how do we feed that learning from those projects back into the children and young person strategic partnership. This is a key issue." (Head of Children's Social Care, 2004)*

The development of partnerships primarily between statutory and non-statutory agencies is another focus of the work of those in strategic positions and is seen as something which would allow them to better achieve the new preventative approach; rather than simply being an end in itself. However, partnership working is not seen as a process of joint working but is seen more in terms of working cooperatively to a mutual set of standards and objectives. The lead officer for Integrated Children's Services believes this, stating:

*"if we are to improve the quality of services in our neighbourhoods then the first thing we need to do is make sure that all the service providers within a particular area are all singing the same hymn sheet." (Head of Integrated Children's Services, 2004)*

However, despite its prominence in the new legislation there is virtually no reference to the participation of children and young people by any of the senior managers however, one of the interviewees states that she appreciates what the children have to say because they are not seen to “bullshit you”. Her role as a children’s participation worker does perhaps explain this uniquely enthusiastic perspective to the participation of children and young people.

This type of acknowledgement of the practical aspects of the new approach to service delivery seems to be particularly evident for those in operational roles rather than those in strategic positions and seem to see the object of their work in relation to their particular initiative rather adopting a more generic Council wide interpretation. As you move from those in senior roles to those in operational positions the object therefore starts to have less of a generic and more of an applied focus. However, despite this focus upon their own respective initiative those in operational roles did demonstrate an awareness of how they must fit into the new local authority landscape and were very aware of not creating partnership structures that were not part of the Children’s Trust arrangements. However, there was still confusion as to what a Children’s Trust actually was and what its implication meant for them now and in the future.

The main aim for those in operational positions was reflected in a rhetorical question asked by the lead officer for Children’s Social Care; this being: “*How can you actually do things that are different to help children some of which may be vulnerable?*”. This question seems to echo Engeström’s concept of historicity (2001) which he saw as



the connection between past behaviour with present action and demonstrates the challenges of transforming professional behaviour. The answer to this question was seen by a number of interviewees as empowering local communities by creating bespoke services which met the needs of each community. This focus upon community was particularly evident when talking with the head teacher of a primary school which had only recently started to consult with parents and children as to how they would like to see the school developed so that it was of more support for parents and carers. This was acknowledged by the headteacher as a significant change in focus but it was also recognised as something that had already started to lead to significant benefit.

Despite the object of those interviewed generally reflecting local and national policy what is apparent throughout the interviews is the lack of reference that is made to helping children and families. In fact, this was only really evident in the interview with the headteacher. All other interviews focused upon the implementation of a variety of local and national initiatives with a particular emphasis upon methods of monitoring and evaluation and is at odds with the ambitions of the 'Five Outcomes' evident in the *Every Child Matters: Green Paper*.

#### **4.5 Interpretations of the Tools used**

Prior to the undertaking of the interviews I was particularly interested to find out about the range of tools that were being used to translate the new government policy into operational reality and I expected to spend a large proportion of the interview

discussing their use. However, the truth was far from the case with only a limited number of tools being highlighted.

It was not too surprising to note that 'funding' was identified by all interviewees as being a significant tool which allowed them to achieve their objectives. However, this funding was nearly always 'ring-fenced' and 'time limited' which did little to either encourage joint working or embed innovative practices through the development of one cohesive community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1999, p.23). The availability of funding is recognised by all as encouraging stakeholders to initially participate but these resources are seen to be dominated by the education agenda and therefore other stakeholders were seen to disperse once the funding had been allocated.

Those in senior roles also saw the amount of money available as relatively insignificant and certainly not enough to facilitate the required transformation but did recognise its use in creating individual projects which experimented with new multi-agency approaches to traditional problems and therefore provide useful learning opportunities. The lead officer for Integrated Children's Services also stated that the requirement to work in partnership as a result of the Children's Trust arrangements had, for the first time, forced him to listen to and try to understand the aims and objectives of those in other agencies. However, he did stress the need for a simplified professional vocabulary so that all stakeholders, regardless of profession, could be included within negotiations and discussions which highlights Daniels (2011) suggestion that everyday professional discourse can prevent full integration of different professional groups. This is highlighted in the section below.

*“So if I went to a head and said, I want to develop a Children’s Trust multi-agency approach on your school site he’d say, I’m not quite sure what you mean. And if I said I want to develop a range of services on your school supported by extended schools that are the language he understands, so yeah, fine. And actually we’re talking a similar thing”. (Head of Integrated Children’s Services, 2004)*

The interviewees that did refer to tools, other than money, tended to be those that were working operationally in areas that predated the Children Act. The types of tools that were used by these stakeholders tended to be in the form of advice that they received from other more knowledgeable professionals and often took place within formal and informal networks which lay outside of the new local authority structures.

A number of interviewees referred specifically to “the windscreen” (Appendix 4) as a tool which actively promoted partnership working. This is a visual aid which demonstrates how services should link together to ensure that those most at risk are moved from specialist to universal services. However, this tool is conceptual rather than practical and could be seen to promote the new philosophy mentioned in the object section above.

The participation worker was the only interviewee to view the involvement of children and young people as benefitting the design and delivery of Children’s Services. Funding therefore seems to be the most prominent tool available in 2004 which is

probably not too surprising when you consider the extent of government funding that was invested to support the changes desired by the 2004 Children Act.

#### **4.6 Interpretations of the Division of Labour**

One of the key features of the Laming Report (Laming, 2003) was the need for statutory and non-statutory agencies to work in partnership for the good of all vulnerable children and young people with the Director for the Council of Voluntary Services stating; *“I suppose the Children Bill and Green Paper has given us – not that we needed it – sort of an excuse to for actually getting other partners on board and driving it forward”*. Despite the fact that discussions around division of labour took up a large section of each interview I was somewhat surprised by the general lack of awareness of the work of other stakeholders or other initiatives. This is evident in the following quotes which are taken from the interview with the primary school head teacher.

*“I don’t know that we’ve got a very clear picture or that I’m very clear about where that fits strategically”. (Primary Headteacher, 2004)*

And

*“How do we link the Children’s Fund initiative with some of the other agendas that are going on like for instance IRT (Information, Referral and Tracking), like for instance the common assessment, like for instance the Children’s Trust?” (Primary Headteacher, 2004)*

This type of confusion is perhaps understood when we examine explanations by the lead officer for Integrated Children's Services which seem vague and confusing.

*"Right, there won't be in the new world an education department and a social services department. There will be Children's Services department but here we are actually saying that isn't education taking over Children's Services it's a new department which is an integration of the two". (Head of Integrated Children's Services, 2004)*

And

*"No, that's because the Children and Persons Strategic Partnerships and its sub-groups is really metamorphosing itself so that we can mainstream all of these project groups that are all over the place into that one planning structure and when we get that one planning structure which we've now got then you can start to say well, right how commissioning activity, how is what you've done? What has it done to the services and how can actually that reflect that in any changes that we would want to make?" (Head of Integrated Children's Services, 2004)*

Perhaps because of this strategic confusion the operational stakeholders generally have a very limited perspective of the division of labour which sees partnership working as a requirement of the new Children's Trust working arrangements rather than as something which helps them achieve their work related goals and ambitions.

However, this is not true in all cases and there are examples of how the focus upon setting up new services from the new funding available has allowed for new partnership working arrangements to be established. The primary school head teacher explains in the following.

*“To start off with, I was taking the children myself up to the junior school, so that they were there at ten to nine. The junior school were going to have a club themselves and we thought, well this is ideal, but they were later in starting, so they were going to have theirs opening in January. So we agreed, in the interim period, that we would take the siblings that we had, up to the junior school. Then the junior school decided that they didn’t want to go for the Breakfast Club and wanted us to continue, were agreeable with us continuing with the Breakfast Club and we were quite happy for them to send a questionnaire out to all of their parents, and to open it up to all of their children, which we then did, which has to be honest, been the making of the Breakfast Club. So we run it for both schools. And we have a walking bus, with two members of staff. Initially it was a teaching assistant from our school, a teaching assistant from the junior school, one at the front, one at the back and they crocodile walked the children up from the estate via the paths and delivered the children to the gates, well, into school. They’re older obviously.”*  
*(Primary Headteacher, 2004)*

All interviewees do agree that education plays a central role in the change agenda often acting as *“the glue in the middle”* which brings many of the statutory and non-statutory agencies together. There are also signs that schools are becoming more

outward looking and are now prepared to look at joint working arrangements with non-school based agencies.

Despite the policy focus upon new ways of working the newly introduced services tend to be located within mainstream agencies and are line managed within these. There is therefore no evidence of distributed management (Hutchins, 1995) with traditional hierarchical systems remaining in place however; the introduction of the different initiatives has meant that there has been a need to identify staff with skills that are different to those that were traditionally required.

Rather than being central to the change agenda the voluntary Sector also remains on the “outside” and separate to the Council. A situation which is viewed by the Head of Voluntary Services, as a *“failing that has always been there”*. The Council is therefore seen to be working with the voluntary sector because it is a requirement of the new funding arrangements rather than because of any identified benefit. However, this antipathy is reciprocal with those who work for the voluntary sector seeming to be reticent about working with practitioners from the Council. This is certainly evident within the statement below which is taken from the interview with the children’s participation worker.

*“Voluntary people are still very apprehensive about coming with suits and ties, the formality. Individuals who came along who then wanting to monopolise all the funding for their particular groups, we just felt that that was not the best way to deliver services, it was more about making the decision based on need*

*rather than individuals coming along and saying actually give us the money and we'll spend it for you.” (Children’s Participation Worker, 2004)*

The introduction of the Children’s Trust arrangements and the significant central government funding can therefore be seen to have created a complex organisation structure which is a combination of a new multi-agency ethos existing within traditional local authority structures within which no clearly articulated division of labour exists. Duplication and role confusion therefore seem to be dominant features of the Children’s Service activity system.

#### **4.7 Interpretations of the Rules**

A quarter of all coded references evident within the interview transcripts related to the rules that the practitioners had to follow in order to successfully undertake their work. This high response possibly reflects the high level of bureaucracy that surrounds the 2004 Children Act together with the procedures that already existed within the local authority prior to its introduction. It certainly highlights the importance that the rules have upon those working within and for Children’s Services. A summary of the comments made by the interviewees is presented below.

- The constant need for change means that initiatives cannot embed and that learning from these does not feed into a coherent knowledge transfer mechanism. The focus of strategic managers is therefore upon the next initiative rather than upon the practicalities of project planning, implementation and with assessing related outcomes.



- The traditional rules that exist are seen to inhibit some of the innovative work of individual interviewees. This can be seen in the insistence upon partnership working which is seen to be time consuming and far from easy with the children's arts worker stating:

*"it takes a lot of time to work in partnership with people and that also ... that can be frustrating because you're waiting for people to get back to you and they don't and, you know, it can involve a lot of chasing people up and things."*  
(Children's Art Worker, 2004)

- The requirement to develop a preventative approach to their work is welcomed by a number of the interviewees with the breakfast club coordinator stating:

*"another example of a project is IRT, which was all about prevention, it was about services going into families in dire need in the area, services being provided by about eight different organisations, and those eight organisations not talking to each other and at the heart, the family and the child being in great need, so I think it's recognised across all organisations, but obviously within my own service it is a there's a strong there's a strong push to put resources into the acute sector, but there's now a growing realisation that we need to put them into prevention."* (Breakfast Club Coordinator, 2004)

- Most of the initiatives that have been introduced are supported by 'ring fenced' funding which does little to facilitate joint working. Partnership working therefore is seen to exist at a strategic rather than an operational level where the focus is

much more concerned with meeting community need rather than having to work with different stakeholders. This is evident in the interview undertaken with the youth and community worker, who explains.

*“You’ve got to provide a service that the community want and different communities have different needs.” (Youth and Community Worker, 2004)*

- Complex governance procedures have been created in order to ensure all initiatives and services are monitored. Feedback mechanisms are seen to be vital to ensuring that stakeholders are kept up to date to ensure that all procedures are being followed and that individual project success is recognised. This however, does favour certain practitioners over others and is highlighted in the interview with the youth and community worker who explains.

*“I’m not very good at feeding up to the high strategic players, I tend to just get on with my job, I am not a glory seeker and that I think at times is a negative thing for myself”. (Youth and Community Worker, 2004)*

These comments therefore seem to suggest that there is something of a contradiction between the apparent attempts by the government to create a new working environment that places the child at the centre of the work of all practitioners but at the same time develop rules and regulations which control professional behaviour and distract from achieving this primary goal. It therefore serves to highlight the need for “qualitative changes” in not only professional practice but also

in the “the landscape of emerging practice” as highlighted by Warmington (2009, p.85).

#### **4.8 Interpretations of the Community**

The new Children’s Trust arena requires all statutory agencies to work together with community and voluntary organisations for the benefit of all children and young people. Despite this requirement education is seen to dominate the local authority but has become much more outward looking and is now seen to be willing to work with external partners. Despite this increased level of cooperation Children’s Services are still seen as school centric with schools are *“not going out to join others”*.

This is evident within the interview with the head teacher who was completely unaware of the changes that had been taking place within the Council and only became aware of these once she became actively involved in setting up a breakfast club which required outside support. This type of horizontal and dialogic learning (Engeström, 2004) is also evident through the work of the community team who only became aware of the number of agencies working with a range of families once they were actively involved with a particular family. A sense of the community within the interviewees work is therefore seen only to be created through an active involvement with that community rather than through the complex governance structures that exist and information sharing mechanisms that have been created.

The focus that has been placed upon partnership working as a result of the 2004 Act however, has led to an increased awareness of their professional community and to the role and function of different agencies through their connection via the multi-agency boards that the interviewees attend. However, despite this increased awareness representatives of the voluntary sector do not feel as though statutory agencies have any understanding as to their role and function.

#### **4.9 Interpretations of the Outcomes**

The interviews were undertaken only a couple of months after the new Children's Trust structure had been introduced and because of this there seems to be little focus upon any explicit outcomes that have been achieved. Instead the interviewees seem to be focusing upon trying to comprehend the implications of the new working arrangements. However, some outcomes were referred to and these are listed below:

- Stakeholders seem to have changed perception as to what constitutes 'good practice' as the agenda and resources are relocated from targeted to preventative services.
- The introduction of partnership working is seen to have broken down barriers between professionals and in certain circumstances with local communities.
- Learning from previous initiatives has been seen to be of benefit to the newly introduced programmes. This can be seen in the learning which has been transferred to the work of the children's participation worker from her colleague who undertook a similar role within the pre-existing Sure Start centres.

- The Children's Fund, in particular, is seen as giving momentum to the concept and idea of joint commissioning, and by turning this into a reality, has made it possible for people to understand its concept and also its potential.
- Funding has been used to create new and innovative services rather than simply *"propping up base budgets"*.
- Some of the interviewees, however, have been pleased to see a number of specific positive outcomes from newly formed services. These being:
  - The breakfast club has resulted in a number of positive outcomes for the school, such as; a reduction in lateness, attendance and poor behaviour. This is acknowledged by the headteacher in the passage below.

*"I had an idea that there was a need for a Breakfast Club but I realised then, that there definitely was a need and how many parents and children would benefit from it. I hadn't quite appreciated that because you don't know all the ins and outs of parents' arrangements, and I had an idea. I'd been approached by a couple of parents, to ask if children could come into school early, but then that becomes difficult because if you ask...you know, if you make arrangements for a couple of parents, you have to do the same for all, so I had an idea but didn't realise the extent that there was the need there."*  
 (Primary Headteacher, 2004)

- The mothers who helped set up the *"street sport project"* were seen to have developed confidence and a number have moved on to other paid roles, such as: youth work and a teaching assistant.

- Services were able to take on a preventative approach to the delivery of services. They were therefore able to identify the causes of non-participation and introduce interventions which removed these barriers and promoted participation. This is explained by the youth and community worker in the passage below.

*“two young girls that were constantly bullying customers that had been to a local shop to buy them alcohol and cigarettes and what happened was these children were seen to be creating havoc, anti-social behaviour. What we did with Children’s Fund was actually looked at what the causes were.....so we pulled together a meeting, looked at what the issue was, the issue was anti-social behaviour, they were hanging around, what’s causing it. Now it was very easy then to slap an order on those children and chances are they knew the system. Once we pulled a meeting together and we looked at what the cause was, the cause was that the child’s parents were alcoholics and the only way that this child could survive with the likes of her mum and dad would be to be drunk herself. What she was doing to gain money was to get drunk herself and bully people to buy her alcohol”. (Youth and Community Worker, 2004)*

Considering the huge financial investment that has been placed into the development of the new Integrated Children’s Services it does however, seem somewhat surprising that there seems to be so little emphasis upon the positive outcomes that have benefitted children and families. Nearly all discussions about the outcomes that

have been achieved have instead tended to focus upon internal local authority processes.

#### **4.10 Contradictions and tensions evident within the activity system**

As was mentioned in Chapter Two, Engeström (1997) believes that contradictions and tensions may be a result of conflicting object motives which have the potential, if resolved, to transform professional behaviour and ultimately the context within which this takes place. Following the analysis of the interview transcripts a list of such contradictions that were in existence in 2004 are listed below.

##### **4.10.1 An individual versus a unified approach**

In 2004 the focus of work for those involved in the delivery of Children's Service was around the development of community specific preventative services. These were attempts to remove barriers to inclusion for children and young people by promoting partnerships between agencies. However, the reality seems to be that the focus of many of those interviewed was actually very insular. Rather than being concerned with creating new partnerships, they were attempting to work out what it is they were trying to do within the parameters of their 'home' service and how best to achieve this within the new preventative services agenda. There is therefore a tension between the introduction of a range of individual initiatives while at the same time trying to create a unified approach to the delivery of Children's Services across all statutory and non-statutory agencies. This is highlighted in the comment by a children's participation worker:

*“We’ve got set targets we’ve got to meet which we haven’t had before, we’ve got to meet within the youth population thirteen to nineteen age range, we’ve got to have contact with 25%, 15% have got to participate and of that 15%, 60% have got what we call a recorded outcome and 30% have got to a credited outcome, so we’ve got very clear targets which have come out in the last year.” (Children’s Participation Worker, 2004)*

#### **4.10.2 Cohesion versus complexity**

The sheer number of service initiatives has created a hugely complex professional environment which means that there is no overall cohesion and there seems to be a lot of opportunity for duplication. There seems to be a number of ‘virtual worlds’ being created which do not fit into a particular structure or system. Middle managers, in particular, demonstrate role confusion and are caught between operational and strategic management issues. This lack of clarity does impact upon the outcomes of the services as some practitioners are unclear as to the geographic, demographic and professional boundaries. This is certainly true for the children’s participation worker.

*“I mean there were occasions when Jackie was doing something at exactly the same time that I was putting something on. And so she wouldn’t be getting kids to her thing because I’d already sent my information out and they’d booked in there. And it ... it’s absolutely ridiculous.” (Children’s Participation Worker, 2004)*



#### **4.10.3 Collective versus individual management**

The focus of the 2004 Act, and for many of the professionals interviewed, is in changing the practice of those who work with children and families however, the structure which has been created within Children's Services means that no one has the sole responsibility or authority to direct a change in practice of individuals as all decisions are made jointly via management boards and other forms of communal corporate governance. It is therefore difficult for senior and middle managers to directly shape operational practice.

#### **4.10.4 Unification versus territorialism**

The education focus of many of the initiatives that have been funded prevents a fully unified Council approach. This territorialism has a historical perspective which comes with "*associated baggage*" which causes tension between the statutory agencies and thereby prevents fully cohesive working practice. Complex legal regulations also prevent full integration of health with education. Therefore full integration is impossible to achieve.

#### **4.10.5 Introducing versus embedding practice**

The Council seems concerned with launching initiative after initiative rather than looking at what is working and embed this into mainstream professional practice. Evaluation of initiatives and new working practices is not fed into a decision making process. There is therefore no evidence of any knowledge transfer mechanisms in place to facilitate learning and promote new ways of working across and within the

Children's Service arena. This frustration is expressed by the breakfast club coordinator:

*“cause it did, it seemed to me like a shooting star, went up and did a lot of things but then tumbled a bit.” (Breakfast Club Coordinator, 2004)*

#### **4.10.6 Professional status versus professional relationships**

It is difficult to develop effective partnerships arrangements because of the differences in professional status that are seen to exist. The voluntary sector is put off by the formality of partnership meetings with the Council whilst senior managers will not attend voluntary sector meetings as they are not viewed as “significant” stakeholders. Effective partnership working therefore seems impossible to achieve. There therefore seem to be two levels of discourse taking place simultaneously which inhibits genuine partnership working. One is communicated via policy and the other is communicated as part of their everyday professional discourse (cf. Daniels, 2011).

#### **4.10.7 Self-promotion versus multi-agency working**

The limited time span of many of the initiatives puts added pressure upon many of the operationally focussed practitioners to demonstrate positive early outcomes. They therefore have to think of ways to market their work so that it has a high profile in order to “*grab the headlines*” rather create effective and innovative ways of working. This means that those who are good at self-promotion have a higher profile than those who have not regardless of the relative effectiveness of their services.

Again frustration is articulated by the children's participation worker in the following passage.

*“And what I’m saying is that it’s no good having these wonderful ideas and opening up all these clubs and this childcare provision if they’re not going to sustain themselves ‘cos they’re won’t be long term funding and we don’t think there will.” (Children’s Participation Worker, 2004)*

#### **4.10.8 Working ‘with’ versus working ‘against’**

In reading the transcripts, it is difficult to get a sense of unity that exists between different agencies or business units which seem to be competing against each other rather than working seamlessly together. Duplication is therefore created, which is seen as a waste of financial resources. The breakfast club coordinator is very clear about this and states:

*“I put through my thing now to tell Tony Blair from me that if only he could pay each LEA a pound per child in receipt of free school meals for a free breakfast he would see academic attainment go up and school attendance and that.....all these other things he was putting in place weren’t going to have such a big impact as if he funded their places”. (Breakfast Club Coordinator, 2004)*

#### **4.11 Conclusion**

The analysis of the interviews developed in Chapter Four provides insight into the state of Children’s Services shortly after the introduction of the Children Act 2004

which endeavoured to transform the way that services were delivered to children, young people and their families. The overriding impression that comes across from the analysis of these interviews is the general sense of confusion and instability that exists across all stakeholders. This is in stark contrast to the work of Lave and Wenger (1999) and in particular their concept of a “community of practice”, which tend to depict coherent and stable professional communities in which the novice moves towards the centre of practice, to become expert, as they become immersed with the surrounding professional community. This seems to have little connection to the world of Children’s Services in 2004 which seems unstable and incoherent. In fact, apart from the headteacher, who acquired knowledge about the setting up of a breakfast club from a professional network, it is difficult to identify a prominent professional community within the local authority from which knowledge is transferred to those who are less knowledgeable. The ‘novices’ that exist within Children’s Services do not seem to have any interest in acquiring knowledge from more experienced peers and also do not have sufficient time to slowly move from ‘novice’ to ‘expert’. In fact their remit is one of change and transformation therefore learning that is taking place must do so in a much shorter time frame and more fluid manner.

This type of learning is much redolent of the process identified by Engeström (1999, 2001), wherein learning within professional communities is presented as being much more dynamic, perhaps reflecting Vygotsky’s (1997, p.226) claim that the development of human behaviour is underpinned by “discontinuity”, “conflict” and “displacement”. However, due to the early stage in the development of Children’s Services it is difficult to differentiate between learning that transforms practice and

that which is associated to simply learning new rules and regulations by which to work.

Within the interview transcripts it is, however, possible to identify two different approaches towards learning. The first is a desire by senior managers to establish a change in philosophy in a way referred to by Shweder (1999, p.102) who believes that a “culture will and can start to develop” if a specific approach is consistently applied over a period of time. Learning in this form can be seen to transform practice as a new set of professional standards are created and a new way of working implemented. The second type of learning is one which is acquired through practical interaction with a particular object so that specific outcomes are achieved. This does bear some resemblance to Engeström’s concept of “expansive learning”, in which behaviour is transformed through the process he calls an “expansive cycle” of trial, reflection and reformulation (1999, p.384). However, the detailed stages which Engeström presents are harder to identify within the real life examples presented above.

The latter type of learning seems to dominate within the new world of Children’s Trusts as stakeholders learn through their engagement with their new area of work and new professional environment. This is particularly evident within certain examples that are presented above in which stakeholders attempt to come to terms with the new joint working arrangements. Partnership working is a significant feature of the 2004 Act and is also evident within the work of both Vygotsky, Leont’ev (Kozulin, 1986) and latterly Engeström (1996; 1999; 2001 and 2004) and in particular

the significance that they place upon the potential that combined human action can create for human and professional behaviour with the latter believing that the development of a shared object (Engeström, 2001) can have a significant impact for the development of new ways of working.

Joint working however, is not particularly evident within any of those interviewed who fulfil operational roles and it does not seem to have materialised at all on an operational level where there is little evidence to support any claims that new approaches to joint working have been adopted. Instead a number of different services are being delivered by a number of different practitioners under the umbrella of the Children's Trust with joint working taking place because of issues around division of labour rather than through the articulation of a shared object (Engeström, 2001). The development of a shared object therefore does not seem to have materialised on an operational level. However, the same cannot be said for those in strategic positions who all focussed upon the development of new joint working arrangements. This has been seen to have had some success, as agencies which have previously had little contact with each other are now seen to be partners within the new Children's Trust arrangements. There therefore seems to be disconnection between the strategic and operational layers.

The reality of a shared object (Engeström, 2001) can be seen to exist on a macro level across the local authority. All practitioners are working to develop a more preventative approach to the delivery of services for children through a more joined up way of working rather than as the practical implementation through the delivery of

services to children and their families. However, the formalised structures developed by those in senior management positions have had difficulty in facilitating this new partnership approach because of both legal regulations which have prevented joint working between health and education services and also because of the different professional status that is seen to exist between agencies within the Council and those which work on the periphery.

Learning therefore seems to be idiosyncratic, resembling Engeström's concepts of "horizontal and dialogic learning", "subterranean learning" (Fuller *et al*, 2005, p.152) and "negotiated knotworking" (Engeström, 2004, p.153), far more than his formalised version of "expansive learning". This individualisation of the learning process creates a highly distributed system of knowledge creation which has echoes of both Hutchin's and Engeström's vision of a "new generation of expertise" (Engeström, 2004, p.145), wherein the ability of the individual to master the changing working context is key rather than the acquisition and recall of traditional knowledge. This idiosyncratic approach to learning and knowledge acquisition, which is evident throughout the transcripts, seems to be littered with the influence of both historicity and multi-voicedness (Engeström, 2001). The professional heritage of those being interviewed seems to influence the interpretations of the object that they are seen to be working on. Examples of this can be seen by the focus that the head teacher places upon teaching and learning rather than in offering wider support to parents, or the relative suspicion that the lead for Child Social Care has toward education or the uneasy relationship that exists between the voluntary sector and the Council.

The multi-voicedness (Engeström, 2001) evident within these relationships can be seen to have historical roots that continue to flourish even within the newly created Children's Trust landscape. Historicity is therefore seen to be a significant factor in influencing the current and future practice of all stakeholders. This professional heritage and its associated philosophy and ways of working could therefore be seen to limit the potential that exists for the development of new working relationships with partner organisation as advocated by the Children's Act. These historical and structural tensions that exist between agencies and individual stakeholders seems to prevent a formalised approach to the change in practice as the rules by which each has to work prevents a truly unified way of working. This is exacerbated by the additional regulation of the government and, in particular, the "ring fenced" and "time limited" nature of the funding that is used for new service delivery. New approaches are therefore generally developed through non-traditional methods of practice and informal way of working.

These non-traditional methods seem to be captured by the work of both Castell (2000) and Holland *et al* (2008), who identify processes whereby individuals can unite for a short period of time, as a result of a shared object (Engeström, 2001) and work for a common purpose and the achievement of a mutual goal. Castell's (2000, p.15) and Holland *et al*'s (2008, p.91) discussion of "networks" and "collective identity", respectively, therefore presents a much more applicable version of professional reality, in 2004, than the more static concept of a "community of practice" as identified by Lave and Wenger (1999). I feel that Holland *et al*'s identification of "cultural knowledge" which takes place as a result of a continual



process of “emerging, forming and reforming” (Holland *et al*, 2008, p.100) certainly has echoes of the interviews who seem to be constantly reinterpreting their policy and professional context so that they can survive periods of transformation rather than undergoing a process of professional metamorphosis as a result of governmental intervention and policy.

Despite the ambitions of Every Child Matter’s and the Children Act (2004) there is actually little evidence to suggest that professional practice has changed to any significant extent and I am disappointed not to discover a more innovative and risk taking approach being adopted. Instead policy seems to have limited potential to actually change professional behaviour which seems to remain a constant; it is simply the rules that change. The practitioner therefore simply becomes astute at interpreting the new policy and its associated regulations in relation to their own role and function with these simply being assimilated into existing professional behaviour.

The detailed analysis presented in the current chapter provides a picture of professional practice in 2004 and highlights the issues that came to light following the introduction of the 2004 Children Act. As was stated in the introduction of this chapter the findings presented provide a unique snapshot of professional life at a point of wholesale transformation, change and confusion. It captures a moment in the history of Children’s Services which otherwise would have been lost and with the benefit of hindsight, allows us to understand the impact that such transformation has had upon professional practice and learn lessons for similar change processes in the future.

In Chapter Five the research leaps to 2012 and re-interviews (where possible) the same practitioners as in 2004. It also follows the same structure as Chapter Four, which facilitates the comparison that will be made in Chapter Six where I compare and contrast the features of professional practice in order to gain insight into how professional behaviour is shaped and how organisations can best facilitate transformation.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **ANALYSIS OF TRANSCRIPTS (2012)**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

The research now leaps forward eight years, to 2012. This was another period of change for those in Children's Services; however, this time it was as a result of a process of rationalisation following the introduction of a range of austerity measures as a result of the global economic crisis (Biressi and Nunn, 2014; Evans, 2012; Rapoport and Gerts, 2010). It was therefore, in the policy rhetoric of the time, a period of shrinkage and downsizing, very much at odds with the period of expansion and recruitment of 2004. The juxtaposition of interview data collected in these two distinct periods serves to highlight the ways in which practitioners respond to organisational change within a large and complex work environment, even when the exact nature of those changes varies enormously.

The interviews that took place in 2012 were designed to enable direct comparison between 2012 and the post-ECM period of 2014. The same interview schedule was used, providing an opportunity for the participants to reflect upon the professional worlds that they inhabited. The relationship between the individual, the institutional structures and the policy context remains a central feature of the 2012 interviews. Again the study of organisational practice has resonance with the work of Daniels (2010) and in particular his request for "the development of cultural-historical analysis of the invisible or implicit mediational properties of institutional structures that themselves are transformed through the actions of those whose interactions are influenced by them" (Daniels, 2010, p.381)

The interviewees in 2012, however, were not always the same individuals as in 2004. This was largely as a result of the redundancies that had taken place over the previous two years of local authority cuts. Four interviewees remained the same with the other five interviewees holding similar professional positions as those interviewed in 2004. They included:

- Three senior managers representing; education, social care and the voluntary sector.
- A primary school headteacher.
- A member of the children's arts team.
- A study support manager.
- An integrated service manager.
- A children's centre inclusion worker.
- A youth and community worker.

Prior to these interviews taking place I expected the discussions to be particularly negative, with the optimism that had accompanied the introduction of the Every Child Matters agenda having faded. However, surprisingly, this was far from the case. The demise of the ECM policy driven environment of 2004 was actually seen by the practitioners as an opportunity to develop a new business-like approach to their work. Partnership working remained at the fore but was now embedded in practice not because it was stated in a policy document but because it was seen as being essential for practitioners to be able to fulfil their professional duties with shrinking financial and human resources. There is also a much clearer sense of purpose due

to the clearly articulated strategic vision which was drawn up by the new Assistant Director which has been seen to minimise confusion and duplication and to have created a much more efficient organisational structure. However, not all was positive, as practitioners tried to keep their jobs by marketing themselves and their work to those in senior decision making positions rather than focusing their attention solely upon the children and young people who required their support.

Throughout the 2012 interviews we clearly see how changes to the institutional structures, within which people work, impacts upon the behaviour of practitioners as referred to by Daniels (2012). This change in behaviour, however, does not remain static but it interacts with the same institutional structures that had initially caused this change in behaviour and by doing so is seen to modify these structures once more. Professional behaviour and the institutional structures are therefore seen to be “co constructive” as identified by Cole (1996, p.4). This is clearly seen in the new business-like approach which the Council advocates which has exposed the limitations of the traditional bureaucratic approaches of the Council and highlighted the need for a more flexible working environment.

Further examples which highlight the cultural historical interplay between the practitioners and their work environment are presented in the detailed analysis of the interview transcripts presented below, which, again starts with an analysis of the frequency that the activity system categories were referred to during the interviews in order to give initial insight into the factors that are most significant in determining workplace behaviour.

## 5.2 Frequency of Codes

The table below shows the percentage of interviewee responses that were coded under each of the activity system categories. As in the previous chapter these are presented as a total and then subdivided into responses made by those in strategic and operational positions. Again, I present these frequencies, while acknowledging the possible contradictions implicit in ‘quantifying’ socio-cultural data but believe that they do serve to illustrate the pattern of discussion that was evident in the interviews.

**Table 5. Frequency of Codes (2012)**

| %                  | Subject | Object | Tools | Rules | D.of.L | Community | Outcomes |
|--------------------|---------|--------|-------|-------|--------|-----------|----------|
| <b>Total</b>       | 5       | 18     | 15    | 35    | 14     | 4         | 8        |
| <b>Strategic</b>   | 3       | 15     | 22    | 31    | 20     | 3         | 5        |
| <b>Operational</b> | 6       | 19     | 10    | 38    | 11     | 5         | 11       |

The results presented above show that those in strategic roles spent the most time discussing their interpretation and understanding of the rules that are relevant to them. The remainder of their attention tended to be evenly spread across the three categories. These being; object, tools and division of labour which account for 57% of the total references made, with only 11% of their coded statements referring to; community, outcomes or subject.

The responses for those in operational positions were somewhat different to those in strategic positions with almost 40% of coding being linked to rules, with the object being the second most common code; accounting for 19% of the total responses. The remaining 43% is divided evenly across; tools, division of labour and outcomes

making up 10% and 11% respectively of all coding with references to subject and community sharing the remaining 11%.

From even the most cursory of glances at the table presented above, it is evident that rules are by far the most dominant category discussed within the interviews for both those in strategic and operational positions. Knowing the bureaucracy that is evident within local government this may not be a complete revelation however, what may appear more of a surprise is the dominance that this has over other, more potentially important codes, such as, the object and the outcomes of their work related activity. Further analysis is presented below which provides more detailed accounts of the content of the interviews through which we can gain further insight into the reasons for this distribution of categories.

### **5.3 Interpretations of the Subject**

The Council has recently undergone a process of rationalisation as a result of central government funding cuts. The restructure that took place in 2011 did so following a review of service provision by the Assistant Director for Children and Family services. As an ex-accountant he is seen to have created a strategy which is clear, precise and targeted at the provision of services for vulnerable children and families and as such is seen to remedy the mistakes that were made post 2003. He states:

*“We got it wrong Paul which is my view, the government had lots of initiatives and what we did wrong was rather than integrate those projects into mainstream business we set them up as projects so we created a whole lot of*

*silo's across the place and our view healthy schools, extended schools and services are actually all part of what we should have been doing anyway in early intervention services". (Assistant Director of Children's Services, 2012)*

The Director of the Council for Voluntary Services (CVS) has sympathy for anyone who has to strategically manage Council services and is happy that he has never been *"tied to a machine"* in the way that those who work for the Council are. He thoroughly enjoys working for the voluntary sector and thrives in his current work environment where he can make his own rules and can adopt his own approach to work. However, despite the bureaucratic tradition of the Council, a significant number of practitioners now define themselves as having an entrepreneurial approach to work, and use the language that I would normally associate with private business. A couple of the interviewees, including the leisure manager and the member of the arts team, have benefited from this change in approach and now have a much higher profile than they had previously, with one stating:

*"the interesting thing is suddenly I am not a joke and if I say something they stop and listen and this new role I have been given proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that he's been looking for people like me in the organisation and there's not many of you and I want to keep you and this was from the big boss." (Leisure manager, 2012)*

This recognition is seen to be as a direct result of their business skills which has seen them both generate revenue for the Council; an achievement which until the



central government cuts had not been recognised or valued. It is particularly interesting to note that these practitioners do not identify themselves as part of the Council or even part of a larger organisation. Instead they see themselves as individuals, and even as mavericks that *“fly below the radar”* and occupy a unique position in which they have been able to create their own working environment. This has resonance with the work of Giddens (2002) and his belief that professionals need to continually learn and acquire new knowledge if they are to be successful in the workplace. It is also interesting to note that these ‘mavericks’ work outside of the main Council building and therefore have more freedom to adopt a more individualistic approach to their work.

I was also interested to discover that the headteacher was not keen on the current government’s drive towards academy schools and instead would like to remain *“under the umbrella of the Council”*. However, the shrinking resources and the forced redundancies of many of the school improvement staff have challenged the sustainability of this. Schools therefore now see themselves increasingly as part of clusters which are trying to replicate the old local authority structures. As a result of this’ *“the dynamic has completely changed”* and the Council no longer has the power it once enjoyed.

The interpretation of the subject has therefore changed for those who work for the Council (but not for the voluntary sector), with schools once more being seen as independent and the Council a smaller but more cohesive business orientated organisation.

#### 5.4 Interpretations of the Object

One of the most striking features of the Council in 2012 is the mandate that it has of “*making a difference*” to the people who live within the local authority. Another is the clear distinction that Children’s Services make between universal and targeted provision. Although these are both accompanied by clear ways of measuring outcomes they are far from complimentary with a targeted approach only making a difference for a minority of individuals. This new strategic approach to the delivery of Council services is viewed cynically by some who see it as being devised in response to the economic crisis rather than a positive managerial decision for the benefit of all children and young people and highlights the reactionary nature of local government. The leisure manager states:

*“I truly believe it hasn’t been a brainchild of some strategic genius within the central government to say this, this has been the aftermath of this other brainchild of someone who is in a desperate situation they’ve got no other options which is sad really because you think if we had implemented say what I have done throughout leisure ten years ago then it’d be ‘look at what they’re doing, they’re doing something right’ and they have only done it through necessity and the massive cuts because they can’t rely on central government grants”. (Leisure Facilities manager, 2012)*

The “*brainchild*” referred to in the extract above relates to the Every Child Matter’s agenda which is seen by all interviewees as initiating the current joined up approach to the delivery of Children’s Services, however, the Assistant Director now see

themselves in the process of developing “*genuine integrating working*” because of the reduction in Council funding and the need for a more efficient and effective style of working. People now have to work smarter in order to achieve their identified outcomes and survive further rounds of redundancies. Partnership working is arguably no longer a ‘buzz word’ attached to a specific policy but is now seen as something that is an essential part of everyday working practice. Despite this clear focus upon the need and desire to work in partnership it is perhaps still surprising to note that some senior managers interviewed still believe that “*breaking down barriers*” between different practitioners and agencies is a clear object of their work with a senior manager in charge of targeted and specialised services stating:

*“It’s different, but when you’re looking at children’s specialist services this is the area where there’s been very much silo thinking and silo approach you had got education SEN services over there with very clear boundaries around statutory requirements and social work teams and health but I needed to actually break down those and get people talking together”. (Senior Manager for Specialist Services, 2012)*

Whatever the reason for this new approach; the smarter way of working that it now advocates has a clear aim of making every single contact count. It also has a clearly articulated “customer” focus to ensure that every contact that an individual has with the Council is a positive experience.

Those interviewed are therefore clearly aware that they now depend upon Council tax funding to survive and are determined to ensure that the Council tax payers are happy with the services they receive. The reference to “customers” also relates to the new business-like language adopted across the Council which has been borne out of a need to continue to provide services at a time when resources are shrinking. The reasoning for the adoption of this new business-like approach is highlighted by the integrated service manager below:

*“(the chief exec’s) looking to do is to bring someone in with a business background because one of the things we need to be aware of now is there is the right to challenge legislation and regulations and therefore we can be challenged about delivering services so we need to be much sharper and business focused and 1) because we’ve got less money and 2) to be creative about how we create and earn money and 3) how we deliver services as well”.  
(Integrated Service Manager, 2012)*

There is also a clearly articulated “needs led approach”, which is different to the old universal ways of working, in that services are now procured for specific families once their needs have been identified and assessed. This targeted approach to the provision of services is seen to avoid duplication by ensuring that no other agencies are offering the same support to an identified family and thereby maximise available resources by reducing duplication. The adoption of a “needs led approach” is a term that I am very familiar from my experience of working in the Council and it does not surprise me to hear this used by the interviewees when discussing the way they work

however, the same cannot be said about term “*outcome based accountability*”, which is now widely referred to but is something which does not seem to fit too comfortably with the prospect of working with vulnerable children and young people and their families with sometimes highly complex needs. This new approach is explained by one the integrated service manager below:

*“So it’s about trying to be very flexible and responsive so that...I suppose the best way to describe it kind of like customer satisfaction so that the customer or the young person’s themselves or our community that we actually responded to them are happy”. (Integrated Service Manager, 2012)*

Despite the *customer focussed* approach that the Council is now seen to be adopting the interviewees are still very aware of the importance of Ofsted and other related inspection regimes that exist together with the ramifications should the outcomes of these be negative. Although they believe strongly that their core business is working with “*vulnerable children*” they do ensure that their working practice fits in with the necessary inspection criteria.

In summary practitioners can be seen to be currently working upon three objects. The first is the move towards targeted provision; the second is the move to a more entrepreneurial approach with the third and final being the desire of the interviewees to keep their jobs and ensure future employment and seems to complement Vygotsky’s perspective that “humans personally influence their relations with the

environment and through that environment personally change their behaviour” (Vygotsky, 1978, p.52).

## **5.5 Interpretations of the Tools used**

As with the interviews in 2004 I was particularly interested to find out about the tools that the interviewees identified in order to achieve their newly defined goals, however, as in 2004, the fact that a process of restructuring had only recently taken place meant that discussions were relatively brief as practitioners had had little time to work within the new Council structure. One tool referred to in 2012, however, is the new software which is designed to help identify families in genuine need and which has the unlikely name of the *“customer relationship management system”*. The software is yet to be fully implemented but once it has been launched it is hoped that it will help with the newly adopted *“outcome based accountability approach”*. Despite this apparent lack of discussion; analysis of the transcripts does identify a range of tools that interviewees have referred to. These tools are listed below:

- Local Councillors are seen as central to the decision making process. It is therefore very important for practitioners to have a positive relationship with the Councillors that have responsibility for their particular area.
- Diplomacy is a skill which is often needed to achieve a specific object. This is particularly evident in the work around the delivery of Family Connect which necessitates practitioners from different agencies working together to support identified families.

- Marketing is something which operationally focussed practitioners now see as an essential aspect of their role to ensure that Councillors and senior managers value their work and continue to fund their service. (This particular tool is specifically linked to practitioners keeping their job rather than improving their service).
- Individual members of staff are seen by those in managerial positions as their most valuable asset. This is as a direct result of recent rationalisation and redundancies which have led to much smaller teams having a much wider brief. Hard working staff that are good at their job are therefore in need.
- The legislation that does exist is seen by some interviewees as being important in helping them shape and give direction to their individual services. This is most notable in the work of the youth and community worker who needed a government policy document to identify how the government were now defining 'vulnerable'.

In short the most significant tool that is currently being used is the communication that exists between local and national stakeholders. This dialogue takes place in a variety of written and verbal forms in an attempt to achieve the objects identified above and again support Vygotsky's belief that language and mediation are central factors in shaping human behaviour (Kozulin, 1986).

## **5.6 Interpretations of the Division of Labour**

The previous structure of the Council was seen by the Assistant Director as being inefficient with large numbers of professionals fulfilling poorly defined roles. This

initially was seen to facilitate better service provision however, it actually created an environment which was so complex that work could not be shared out between different practitioners and prevented coherent joined-up provision.

The new structure, which was introduced in 2012, is much more streamlined and is seen to be able to better support the coordinated work of Children's Services. Capacity has therefore increased through improved ways of working and a reduction in duplication. However, there is some concern over relationships that currently exist between teams because of the tensions that have been created during the rationalisation process.

The restructure that took place in 2011 has also created new roles which were needed to facilitate new ways of working as a result of the reduced workforce. These new roles have wider remits and are seen by the interviewees to be very demanding; often taking on more responsibility with no increase in salary. As result of this increase in workload some of the work is seen as not being done as well as it used to be. One of the causes of this is the generic job descriptions which have been developed for professionals involved in targeted intervention work and has led to a reduction in specialist staff. As a result of this, senior managers have decided to identify thematic leads to ensure that specialisms are not lost. However, specialist staff are frustrated by the generic nature of their involvement with families which are referred via Family Connect.



An increase in the pay and status of social workers in 2010 has also created a new dynamic within the Council which are not seen to be positive. Social workers also insist on being managed by other social workers; they therefore cannot fit within the new local authority cluster arrangements and again raises questions over the feasibility of multi-agency working (cf. Daniels, 2012). These new clusters are poorly understood by those inside the Council who see what was previously referred to as integrated childcare teams as taking over Children's Services rather than seeing the new working arrangements as a new era and a new approach. The historical heritage of those involved is therefore seen to inhibit new working practices.

Working in partnership is still an important aspect of the work of the interviewees; however, it is no longer because of the Children Act that they are working together. Partnership working currently takes place via Family Connect and it is seen as helping practitioners to understand the decisions that are made and gives confidence to establish further partnerships. Partnerships are also seen to be essential if the needs of children with complex needs are to be met due to the different layers of support that are needed. However, there is also now realism as to what is actually considered to be genuine partnership working. This realism is reflected by one interviewee who states that *"people talk about multi-agency working don't they but actually putting five agencies in a room doesn't do anything"*.

The Council in 2012 seems much more realistic about the practicalities of integrated working and claims to have developed a much more streamlined and efficient

organisation in which partnership working has become embedded as part of everyday working practice.

## **5.7 Interpretations of the Rules**

One of the most notable features of practice in 2012 is the lack of reference to national policy or directives that were so evident during my time working within the local authority. However, this was not necessarily a negative feature. The main drivers for change are now seen to be locally based with little external direction currently being provided. The Council is therefore currently working with senior managers to develop a cohesive plan across the Council which will shape practice for the foreseeable future and also hold professionals to account for their respective outcomes. The senior managers are also aware that they must manage staff more effectively than has been done previously and are currently undertaking a needs analysis to identify what staff training needs currently are. The Director of the Council for Voluntary Services explains that:

*“a policy just allows people to do the bare minimum and escape detection then that’s one thing but if we want people to actually transform personally into a much more effective worker then policies don’t enable that; they can provide a framework but I believe its inside and that you want to understand families better.”(Director of the Council for Voluntary Services, 2012)*

Although it has not officially been retracted there is no mention in the interviews of the *Every Child Matter’s*: Five Outcomes which defined practice post 2003. This lack

of reference to the Every Child Matter's agenda has been accompanied by a conscious decision by the Council to adopt a commercial approach to all services including those for children and young people. This new business-like approach has created a new set of rules within the Council which require employees to be flexible and responsive to change. The move to a business-led approach however, is proving to be much easier 'to be said than done' as the Council's rules are seen to be created for office workers not commercial business. However, the recent restructure has allowed the Council to change the terms and conditions of staff which offer more chance to compete within an increasingly business led environment.

Family Connect reflects this new approach because it is seen to make sense both operationally and in terms of efficiency. It is also not seen as a service specifically for children and families but for the Council as a whole and therefore avoids the silo mentality and duplication which was so evident in the past. The practitioners who work for the voluntary sector however, have always faced much less bureaucracy than those that work within the local authority and also do not have the same pressure to run specialist services. This flexibility has seen the voluntary sector thrive in the current environment which is now in a period of major expansion. Schools have also noted a significant change in the rules that they work to as Council services have begun to disappear. It has also allowed the schools much more freedom as no one from the local authority can come in and say *"you need to do this because it's all about that"*.

Rules are therefore a significant feature of professional practice and despite the reduction in government policy they are still seen to significantly influence professional practice. However, these rules are not always complementary and do cause confusion and in 2012 are seen to have been created by; traditional Council protocol, external inspection regimes together with personal interpretation of their current context in the manner outlined by Leont'ev (1978).

## **5.8 Interpretations of the Community**

A surprising feature of the 2012 interviews was the lack of reference that was made by participants to their respective professional and geographic communities which had been such a key part of the roles of those employed in 2004. This seems to be because of their newly defined roles and new ways of working which focuses upon customers rather than the communities which they serve. However, this is seen differently by the Assistant Director for Children's Services. Who states:

*"As a co-operative Council there's an expectation that we work with the communities and we work with our workforce so one of the things were looking to do for the work with strengthening the families is to work with the community to understand what they believe is right or wrong with services and understand their view how we can address some of the poverty issues out there with a view to putting services in place to take us forward". (Assistant Director for Children's Services, 2012)*

## 5.9 Interpretations of the Outcomes

In 2012, as in 2004, there seems to be little focus upon outcomes that have been achieved. This may be because of the post-2010 rationalisation of the Council. Instead the 2012 interviewees seem to be focusing upon trying to again comprehend the implications of the new working arrangements. However, the following outcomes have been identified during the interviews.

- The restructuring of Children's Services has led to a reduction in the tiers of middle management. This has been seen a positive development as it has created a much more cohesive and efficient organisation.
- The restructuring has also provided the opportunity to identify staff who share the Council's new commercial vision; those that didn't have been made redundant.

The Assistant Director explains:

*"the thing about restructure is I would like to think that's giving us the opportunity to really weed out the people who wanted to be here and the ones who didn't; the ones who didn't have gone and we've got a really strong employee workforce who understand the vision we've got." (Assistant Director for Children's Services, 2012)*

- The new job roles are very much operationally focused with much less bureaucracy surrounding them. Their new roles are therefore seen to be much more focussed around the need of the individual and is seen to remind practitioners of the original reasons why they joined a caring profession. The youth and community worker states:

*“I think that’s because a lot of the people who come into this kind of work want to make a difference for the lives of young people but not make a big song and dance about it and that achievement and person’s progression is their satisfaction for doing their job”. (Youth and Community Worker, 2012)*

- Professionals are aware of the potential benefit that a change in practice can have for those in need and can be used as a way of encouraging further transformation of professional behaviour. Professional aspiration therefore seems much more grounded and evidence based than it once was. This is expressed by the head of specialist services in the section below:

*“Well if you can change the practice for the professionals it will impact on the children and I can’t separate them out because there’s no point in changing practice unless it’s going to have a positive outcome for the child so my approach is usually to sell the benefit to the child and to the professional in order for them to change.” (Senior Manager for Specialist services, 2012)*

- Schools remain structurally unchanged however; they have witnessed the disintegration of Children’s Services. This is now seen to be having a negative impact on all children and families who once relied on a range of supportive services.
- The voluntary sector has benefitted from the reduction in funding and influence of the local authority and has now changed its focus from an agency that simply supports the voluntary sector to one which now provides a range of services for

children and families. It has also recently purchased a large office block from the Council which it intends to lease back to the Council and other statutory agencies.

In line with the theoretical perspective of the Cultural Historical approach all of the above outcomes have can be seen to have become factors which have stimulated further changes in professional practice which highlight the way in which “human psychological processes emerge through culturally mediated, historically developing, practical activity” (Cole, 1996, p.5).

## **5.10 Contradictions and tensions within the system**

As in the previous chapter the contradictions and tensions (Engeström, 1997) evident within the 2012 interviews have been identified and are presented below.

### **5.10.1 Bureaucracy versus commerciality**

One of the most significant contradictions evident in 2012 is the tension that existed between traditional Council rules, which were seen to be heavily bureaucratic and risk avoidant, with the pressure to become more commercially focused. This has caused frustration for those trying to adopt a more flexible and innovative approach especially when working with the Human Resources department which plays a central role in ensuring that Council policy and Council rules are fully implemented. The following extract from the interview with the leisure facilities manager highlights the frustrations that are currently being faced.

*“I can only speak on a commercial base; it’s like smashing a round peg into a square hole. Policies and procedures and working directive etc. that the*

*Council run or adhere to are generally based on office workers. Now if I am competing in the private sector and I have got a couple of people I need to work extra hours. One they're not allowed to do it and sometimes I take a working time directive, casuals are not really casuals as they have to be treated as employees and given a contract; there's all sorts of anomalies that go on but yet you still have to provide your targets that you're set. (Leisure Facilities Manager, 2010)*

The Council's new commercial ambition does not always seem to complement the public service environment which is focused upon supporting the most vulnerable and hard to reach children and families. This concern is expressed by the youth and community worker in the quote below:

*"Yeah and it was like 'we need to get this cost down and makes some money here' and I worry that the eye has been taken off the ball in terms of the thoughts and feelings and wishes of the child and what's best for them."*  
*(Youth and Community Worker, 2012)*

#### **5.10.2 Restructuring versus 'empire building'**

The new Council structures are poorly understood by those practitioners who work in and outside of the Council. They believe that the previously named Integrated Childcare team is taking over Children's Services because of the expansion of the role of the children's centre managers into one which commissions services for all children and young people (aged 0-18yrs) rather than seeing the new working



arrangements as a new Council structure. This has created some degree of tension with practitioners who can remember the previous working arrangements and who feel that their role is being undermined.

### **5.10.3 “Doing your job” versus “being seen to do your job”**

Most of the interviewees have recently been through a stressful rationalisation process. They therefore feel vulnerable to the potential of future redundancy and realise that they must be able to demonstrate the impact that their role is having to senior managers and local Councillors to ensure the safety of their job. This need to promote services has created a situation in which one interviewee believes that there is a difference between “doing your job and being seen to do your job”. This further tension has the potential to divert focus away from supporting those in most need towards the marketing of their individual success. This in turn may also cause tension between practitioners and teams who work within Children’s Services which may potentially negatively impact upon the effectiveness of the Council. This is explained by the youth and community worker below:

*“A big hindrance has been the restructure process not only in terms of the reduction and resources but in terms of staff and financial resources but the whole process of going through that reorganisation has been a hindrance because we had long periods of time where staff (me included) didn’t actually know where they would be or their role would be and even now that were working through that and I am in post as a team leader we have still got the part time staff to work through and we still have full time staff in posts who have so far been unsuccessful in gaining new posts who yet haven’t been*

*given their notice but when they do it will be three months' notice and so were still in the picture, so you're trying to develop something new and trying to be enthusiastic and excited about developing something new and to honest when we meet as a team we are but there's people around who still haven't got their future sorted and staring redundancy in the face". (Youth and Community Worker, 2012)*

#### **5.10.4 National policy versus local practice**

The need for practitioners *"being seen to do"* their job is made more challenging because of the dearth of local and national policy guidance. Although there is little in the way of national policy or guidance what there is of it is seen to conflict with what they are trying to do locally. This can be seen in the Munro Review (DfE, 2011) which promotes a single assessment process at a time when the Council is trying to develop a multi-agency approach. This contradiction is seen to have significant consequences when the service is eventually inspected:

*"you've also got the Munro report and where we have got a slight problem is you've got both Monroe recommending single assessments and plans and you've also got the SEN recommending single assessments and plans and they've got pilots for both of those and they're not talking to each other and I find that personally frustrating because I am not either SEN or social work I am both so I have to find a format that fits across both of those so the government lead initiatives are also going along parallels so they need to join up as well". (Senior Manager for Specialist Services, 2012)*

#### **5.10.5 Multi-agency working versus individual professional identity**

Tensions are also seen to exist within multi-agency teams as a result of issues around; professional identity, salary structures, professional status, admin support, and available resources. An example of this can be seen to exist between social workers, who are seen to work “*office hours*”, and other children’s service workers, who are seen to be more flexible and more committed. However, regardless of the tensions that are seen to exist between professionals there is recognition of the important role that multi-agency working now plays with the Integrated Service Manager stating:

*“for me it’s about multi-agency working and respecting and valuing other people’s professions and where they come from and understanding what their role is because when you’re leaner you’ve got to make sure that you don’t duplicate work.” (Integrated Service Manager, 2012)*

#### **5.10.6 The local authority versus the voluntary sector**

Tensions are seen to exist between the local authority and the voluntary sector. The local authority no longer funds any aspects of the voluntary sector and they are no longer strategic partners within the Children’s Trust. In fact the voluntary sector now provides a number of services for children and families which compete directly with the Council. The flexibility of the voluntary sector in comparison with the heavily bureaucratic nature of the local authority is seen as one of the reasons why it is currently in a state of expansion whereas the latter is in decline. Another reason that has been given for the current growth of the voluntary sector’s has been put down to

the level of expertise that is evident within the voluntary sector as opposed to the Council which is seen to be led by an accountant rather than a skilled children's service practitioner. With one interviewee stating; *"we had xxxx before then who again was an accountant but knew buggar all about children"*. However, there is an appreciation by the voluntary sector that they do work with a different clientele which is much less vulnerable and therefore provides a much less intense environment within which to work. The Director of the Council for Voluntary Services sector explains below:

*"I mean one of the changes for me is what we do now is important but no one is going to die if we get it wrong (that's why the drivers plough into a bunch of school kids) it's unlikely that anybody would be physically or psychologically harmed in anything we do and I do understand having worked in Children's Services that its exactly the opposite so you're often driven by disaster whereas here it's much more relaxed". (Director of the Council for Voluntary Services, 2012)*

#### **5.10.7 Targeted provision versus a universal offer**

The current focus upon targeted support has meant that there is a middle group of families who are not poor enough to access free support and not rich enough to be able to pay for the services they require. This means that these families have to become more vulnerable and more in need in order to access support that would be beneficial for them. The very opposite that the new 'Family Connect' service is trying to achieve. This highlights the way that national policy defines the boundary within

which practitioners work which inevitably has an impact upon the families not classed as 'in need'. The integrated service manager explains:

*“if you can support one or two families whether that’s through some family support work or counselling for the children or a service that’s available through the Every Child Matter’s agenda then it’s worth the Daily Mail headlines because if you can take one child out of the cycle of poverty then it’s worth doing, and I think that’s one of the problems with it because you’ll always have the Chancellor of the Exchequer there wanting value for money and you can’t always see straight away and these are long term projects and it has made an impact on our families and we are now starting to see the effects of that unravelling in a negative way because clearly through the time of recession the stress on families financially and emotionally and from all angles and where it gets amplified is in places like this in schools; were now working in a time now where those things that came through Every Child Matters are starting to unravel and there’s less of it there but the expectations are still the same and you can be left with alien faces sometimes but it’s ‘your fault’”.*  
*(Integrated Service Manager, 2012)*

## **5.11 Conclusion**

The Council’s process of rationalisation which took place in 2010/11 has led to significant redundancies and has created a much smaller organisation with a much clearer strategic vision. This has seemed to facilitate the development of what Engeström (2001) would call a shared object through the better coordination of

children's service practitioners. The shared object in this context seems to focus around the need for the practitioners to work in a more effective and productive manner which advocates a commercial approach to the undertaking of professional duties.

This change in approach represents a significant transformation in practice for practitioners who work within Children's Services, who have never previously had to adopt a commercial approach to their work. However, this transformation has not occurred as a result of a formalised learning process but seems to have taken place in a much more abrupt manner as a direct result of a new strategic approach following the restructure of the Council and the series of phased redundancies which have taken place over the previous eighteen months.

This fear of redundancy therefore seems to have been a very effective stimulus for the transformation of professional behaviour unlike the previous government attempts to change professional practice through the introduction of national policy which was so evident in 2004. This seems to support Luria's perspective that "human psychological processes" emerge through culturally mediated, historically developing practical activity and questions the potential that government policy can have as a tool for the transformation of professional behaviour (Cole, 1996, p.4). Practitioners therefore are seen to individually interpret and negotiate their own behaviour in response to issues that personally affect them rather than via mechanisms, such as policy documents, which seem detached from their own personal experience.

This type of slow development of human behaviour, which is identified by Luria, as a result of action on and reaction to the context within which professionals live and work seems at odds with the rapid change in behaviour suggested by accounts given within the interviews. This, therefore, seems more related to Holland *et al*'s (2008, p.91) discussion around the development of "collective identity" where recognition exists that individuals who share a specific perspective upon their immediate context can act as a "dynamic force of change", especially during periods of threat and vulnerability, and therefore allows behaviour to change in a much more rapid manner. It also seems different to the generational transformation which is evident in Lave and Wenger's (1999) discussion around "communities of practice" which again portrays the change in professional behaviour as taking place in a much more evenly paced manner.

However, despite this difference in the speed of transformation, the Council in 2012 does seem to have a clear professional identity which could be seen to represent a relatively stable "community of practice" (Lave and Wenger, 1999). It could also be suggested that the two interviewees who have been recognised because of their respective business skills could be considered as 'experts'. These 'experts' now arguably have a responsibility to transfer their skills and knowledge to 'novices' who have limited knowledge and understanding of private business in the way that has been identified by Lave and Wenger(1991). This type of knowledge transfer does require 'learning' to take place as an individual moves from 'not knowing' to 'knowing'.

However, 'learning', within the local authority in 2012, does not seem to be as one dimensional as the process of "learning by peripheral participation" which is presented by Lave and Wenger (1999) and seems much more fluid, nuanced and complex and therefore seems much more aligned to Engeström's concept of "subterranean learning" (2004). Learning therefore seems to have taken place as a reaction to the new working conditions and expectations of the Council, rather than through a formal induction or training programme and again highlights the symbiotic relationship that exists between the practitioners and the context within which they work which connects with Vygotsky's fundamental belief around human behaviour which is summarised in the reference below.

*"The basic characteristic of human behaviour in general is that humans personally influence their relations with the environment and through that environment personally change their behaviour." (Vygotsky, 1978, p.52)*

It also seems to reaffirm Vygotsky's notion that learning, in its real life context, is made up of "discontinuity", "conflict" and "displacement" (Vygotsky, 1997, p.226) which makes the management of any proposed transformation challenging as it seems to take place in an idiosyncratic rather than in a uniform and ordered manner. Engeström's portrayal of "negotiated knotworking" (Engeström, 2004, p.153) as a means of connecting different practitioners with different expertise through the "orchestration of collaborative performance between loosely connected actors and activity systems" (Engeström, 2004, p.153) does seem to capture something of the process that has taken place in 2012; that is, the development of a new professional



approach not as a result of a policy document but as a result of action and interaction between practitioners within the work context.

Action by professionals within a particular context is therefore seen to develop what may be called practitioner “knowledge” which is formed as a result of a continual process of “emerging, forming and reforming” (Holland *et al*, 2008, p.100). The acquisition of this ‘knowledge’ might therefore be regarded as allowing practitioners to function appropriately during periods of uncertainty and transformation which, as a result of its acquisition, helps secure employment. The ability to acquire this type of fluid ‘knowledge’, which is related to a particular period of transition, could be a much needed skill for local authority workers intent on securing employment during times of wholesale redundancies. It is therefore not surprising that reference to this knowledge/skill seems to be evident within all the transcripts, since the interviewees represent a group of professionals that have successfully maintained employment during a particularly challenging period of change and transformation.

The development of a new “*business-like*” approach could be seen to represent the type of knowledge that practitioners now need to acquire. However, traditional Council rules arguably inhibit the achievement of this shared object (Engeström, 2001), demonstrating the influence that historical practice can have upon current strategic aspirations and highlighting again the central role that historicity and multi-voicedness (Engeström, 2001) play in the development of new forms of professional behaviour. The conflict of old and new working practices also highlights the challenges that large organisations, such as Councils, face when attempting to

transform professional practice because they are unable to disassociate themselves from the previous professional generations because of the often outdated rules which are based upon previous professional practice which are often fiercely protected by those who oversee the Council's policies and practices.

The professional landscape evident in 2012 suggests that there has indeed been a period of transformation and change for Children's Services. However, unlike 2004, this change has been one of rationalisation leading to redundancy with reductions in the type and amount of services available to children and families. Despite the negative nature of this change process, the outcomes seem to have been remarkably positive. It would seem that a clearer, more efficient organisation has risen from the ashes of the 2004 Children Act. It also seems remarkable that despite the different technologies that are now available that the most effective and widely used tool in achieving the newly articulated object seems to be verbal communication between key stakeholders. This resonates with Kouzlin's (1986) discussion about the importance that Vygotsky placed on the role of language in the negotiation of new behaviour, which in this study, comprises new professional practices in Children's services.

Chapter Four and Five of this thesis have analysed interview data, in order to explore accounts of changes of professional practice and organisation between 2004 and 2012. Both chapters follow an identical structure and present data in a clear concise manner which is rooted in the interview transcripts. This deliberate consistency of presentation provides a comparative depiction of the challenges and opportunities

evident in both years. It allows for a comparison of professional practice across the two dates so that it is possible to identify features of the activity system which both facilitate and deny opportunities for the successful transformation of Children's Services and professional practice and is presented in the following chapter; Chapter Six.

## CHAPTER SIX

### A COMPARISON OF PRACTICE BETWEEN 2004 AND 2012

#### 6.1 Introduction

Chapters Four and Five of this thesis capture specific periods in the history of Children's Services in England and provide insight into shifts in professional practice evident between 2004 and 2012, using CHAT (Luriya *et al*, 1979) as an analytical framework. This unique perspective into two significant periods of change has been gained from the perspectives of practitioners that have lived and worked through this turbulent period. The quasi-longitudinal nature of the research facilitates a comparison, using a consistent approach to data collection and data analysis and therefore provides a robust examination of the factors that influence and shape professional behaviour together with an overview of the culture and practice of Children's Service practitioners that existed between 2004 and 2012.

The findings presented below offer a complex amalgam of features, issues and processes that have come together in a process of continual interaction which on the surface provides an impression of robust professional practice but on closer inspection suggests a continual state of flux, in which individuals are constantly having to reinterpret their work environments and reinvent their own respective professional roles; in order to give the impression of stability in a way that resonates with Holland *et al*'s belief that managers often present "an ontological coherence ... that is rarely tenable on the ground" (Holland *et al*, 2008, p.28). This process of reinterpretation and self-reinvention does not take place in a vacuum (Cole, 1996)

but does so in an environment moulded through interplay between local work practices and the constant flow of external policy directives.

The findings of interviews suggest that this interplay has led to significant shifts in practice between 2004 and 2012. These include shifts from; preventative to targeted provision, and from a universal approach to the provision of services for all, to one that redefines service users as consumers of services. The Council has therefore become very much focused around the language of business. Despite the reduction in policy directives evident in 2012 we also see a move from confusion, as to the roles that practitioners were fulfilling in 2004, to one in which there appears to be a much clearer sense of purpose where partnership working no longer takes place because of a statutory requirement but because of its necessity in achieving specific work based outputs at a time of shrinking resources. This complex picture of change and transformation provides fascinating insight into professional practice and through the identification of similarities and differences in working practices, between the two dates, it is possible to tease out tentative conclusions as to what might be required to shape and influence the development of future professional practice.

The following section reviews the differences that were evident between 2004 and 2012 before moving on to section 6.3 where I examine the similarities between the two periods. This is followed by the presentation of the results of a brief questionnaire which serve to triangulate the findings of the interview transcripts before finally reflecting upon the lessons that can be learnt from the comparison of professional practice in 2004 with 2012.

## **6.2 2004 to 2012: a period in transition**

### **6.2.1 Redefining Children's Services**

The research that has informed this thesis has, through one particular case, illuminated the ways in which the sometimes fuzzy definitions of Children's Trusts, apparent at the outset of the Every Child Matters agenda, have been clarified through professionals' learning in practice. In 2004 there was considerable uncertainty and confusion as to what was meant by the concept of a Children's Trust. This uncertainty was accompanied by concern as to the implications that this had for the work of professionals associated with the development of the newly formed Children's Services. In 2012, following another period of reorganisation, practitioners seemed to have a much clearer understanding of the new Council structure and its arrangements. The Council had therefore changed from being a highly complex and highly fragmented work environment, in which a plethora of initiatives (SSU, 1999; DfES, 2001; DfES, 2002; DfES, 2003 and DfES, 2004) populated the landscape, to one which is much smaller with a much clearer sense of purpose.

This clarity of purpose can be seen to have been gained through the implementation of a clearly articulated strategic plan. This is very different to 2004 where senior strategic managers were struggling to come to terms with a new professional landscape and unable to create a clear strategic vision. Despite this clarity of purpose the Council in 2012 no longer has the dominance it enjoyed in 2004 with schools and other agencies, such as the voluntary sector, becoming a much more prominent force within the Children's Service environment. The relationship that the Council has with schools in 2012, can actually be seen as a reversion to their

position pre-2004 with schools once again being seen as standing outside Council structures; a position which does seem hard to comprehend considering the time, effort and funding that was invested in embedding schools within the previous Children's Trust (DfES, 2001; DfES, 2002; DfES, 2004) arrangements in an attempt to create a much more cohesive children's service environment.

### **6.2.2 A reconceptualisation of partnership working**

Another difference that exists between the two dates is the business-like language that has now been adopted by those who work for the Council. This is far removed from the language of 2004 which had a more emancipatory overtone which focused around the concepts of prevention, partnership and participation. This emphasis upon working in partnership was a particular feature of practice in 2004 following recommendations of the Laming report (2003) and was seen as a revolutionary way of working which would facilitate the desired preventative approach. Partnership working in 2004 was defined in a different way to how it was viewed in 2012, where it was promoted via national policy directives. By contrast, in 2012 it is seen as an essential element of everyday practice, due to the demands that practitioners are faced with at a time of shrinking financial and human resources. The *Every Child Matter's*: Green Paper could therefore be seen to have initiated the current joined up approach to the delivery of Children's Services which is now embedded into professional practice so that "*genuine integrating working*" is seen to be taking place, which perhaps challenges Daniels (2011) and Riddell and Tett's (2004) scepticism over the feasibility of multi-agency working because of differences in professional dialogue and issues around race, gender and social class.

### **6.2.3 Reconceptualising the service user**

Another significant difference between the two periods is the clear “*customer focus*” that exists within the Council in 2012, which again, seems at odds with the more benevolent approach which was evident in 2004. The reference to “*customers*” relates specifically to the new business-like language which now conceptualises service users as a potential source of much needed income rather than as a client group in need of much needed support. This is a significant change in professional philosophy whereby services, which in 2004, were free at the point of delivery, have now been redefined through the use of language more normally associated with private business. Levitas (2012) however, would perhaps question whether the adoption of this new *business-like* approach is actually a response to the global economic crisis by those who work within Children Services and would perhaps suggest that this is actually the effect of a specific neoliberalist political philosophy which has been introduced by the ConLibDem coalition.

### **6.2.4 A move towards targeted provision**

Despite the new strategic approach adopted by the Council; to transform service users into “*customers*” of services, there is still a focus upon identifying “*need*”. However this move towards commercialisation of services seems very much at odds with the earlier ambitions of Every Child Matters which was rooted in social justice (National College for School Leadership, 2005) for all. However, the way that services are provided for children and young people has changed significantly with services now being procured once the needs of the child or family have been identified and assessed rather than the universal provision that was evident in 2004.



The object of the Council could therefore be seen to have changed from one which purported to focus upon universal community access to one that now has adopted the language, if not the practice, of commercial business. The focus upon; prevention, partnership and participation therefore seems to have been replaced by one which focuses upon accountability and efficiency as a direct response to the central government funding cuts which has seen investment in Children's Services fall dramatically (Biressi and Nunn, 2014; Evans, 2012; Levitas, 2012).

#### **6.2.5 Developing new tools for new strategic ambitions**

As a result of this change in focus practitioners have changed the tools (Engeström, 1999) that they use. "The windscreen" (Appendix 4) which helped practitioners understand the concept of universal prevention is no longer referred to and in its place has emerged computer software which supports the recently introduced process of *"outcome based accountability"*. The role of Local Councillors and the need for diplomacy and self-marketing in relation to them has now also become an important feature of professional practice as practitioners attempt to increase their professional profile in an attempt to secure the future of their own jobs.

None of those interviewed, however, seem bitter over these changes and view the previous Children's Service structure (DfES, 2004) as being inefficient and ineffective in contrast to the current provision which has been developed as a result of a systemic review undertaken by an Assistant Director. He has created a coordinated and streamlined structure which attempts to avoid duplication and maximise efficiency via the newly formed Family Connect which acts as a hub for all services.

The Council is therefore no longer made up of a range of individual initiatives. and education no longer acts as *“the glue in the middle”* with schools now being seen as a separate agency and a potential generator of much needed income. The Council can therefore be seen to have redefined itself from an organisation that once dominated Children’s Services to one that now serves a specific role within an increasingly fragmented and less bounded environment and resonates with Daniels interest in “human communicative action that leads to a shift from the ‘given’ ” (2010, p.378).

#### **6.2.6 The implications of rationalisation**

The restructuring that took place in 2011 has created a range of new occupations with wider job remits as a result of the reduction in staffing levels and funding. These wider job roles have led to a vast reduction in the number of complex governance structures and procedures which were needed to link practitioners to senior strategic managers and management board members as a result of the Children’s Trust arrangements and national policy directives (SSU, 1999; DfES, 2001; DfES, 2002; DfES, 2004) which stipulated the need for projects and services to be overseen by multi-agency management boards. The rationalisation of the Council in 2012, together with a reduction in the number of national policy directives, has facilitated a move away from a centralised governance model and has allowed decisions to be made on a local level. This shift to a more localised decision making process seems to have created a need by the Council for practitioners to have a more flexible approach to work which is adaptable and responsive to change (cf. Avis, 2010). Despite this need for the modern Children’s Service professional to be

entrepreneurial and possess increased flexibility there is now tension between this desire and the traditional rules, regulations and processes by which the Council functions. Historicity and multi-voicedness (Engeström, 2001) are therefore dominant forces in the Council's desire for change and transformation. The tension that exists between flexibility and the bureaucracy evident within the Council perhaps highlights why the voluntary sector is now thriving during this apparent period of national austerity as they are quick to respond to national and local need because of their independence and lack of regulation.

#### **6.2.7 Rules as barriers to new ways of working**

Bureaucracy can be seen to pervade the work of Children's Service practitioners in both phases of the research. These *rules* predate the Children Act (2004) and can be seen as a historical legacy of previous profession generations (cf. Engeström, 2001) which can now be seen as actively preventing the development of new innovative entrepreneurial practice: a Council priority. A similar type of contradiction can be seen to exist between the rules and the object of the work (cf. Engeström, 1999) in regards of the development of partnership working which was a requirement of the 2004 Act.

In 2004 there was little evidence of partnership working but by 2012, when there are no policy directives to force practitioners to work with different agencies, it has become an integral part of professional practice and could be seen to be a "dynamic force for change" (Holland *et al*, 2008, p.91). There therefore seems to be a 'disconnect', in both years, between a desired object *of work* activity and the rules (cf.

Engeström, 1999) that are devised to achieve them: with the bureaucratic rules often failing to achieve their desired outcome. As a result of the change in policy direction, from prevention to targeted provision (DfE, 2011), stakeholders also seemed to have changed perception as to what they define as 'good practice'. This is now much more focussed around the specific need of the individual child and family; however, this change is not viewed by all as being positive and is seen by some as having a negative impact upon the lives of children and families who once relied on a range of preventative services but who are no longer viewed as being in enough need to warrant free access to these services.

Despite the general confusion and duplication that the introduction of the 2004 Children Act seemed to have created it was seen by a large number of professionals as providing much needed support and opportunities for all children and young people across the authority. This universal support has now gone and opportunities for all children and young people is reducing as the Council moves from a universal approach, which promotes prevention to a targeted approach for children and families who are in most need and raises a question as to what has happened to those children and young people who fall just short of being defined as most in need and to the governmental ambitions to make Every Child Matter.

### **6.3 2004 – 2012: Consistent features of professional practice**

#### **6.3.1 Individual interpretation of the collective object**

As has been previously stated, 2004 and 2012 represent periods of significant change. Although the rationale for this change is significantly different, the confusion

that exists for operational practitioners early in the change process is similar. During both periods of reconfiguration Children's Service practitioners seem to have become concerned over the implications that the proposed change has for them individually. This level of concern created anxiety which arguably distracted them from their professional duties and responsibilities.

Each interviewee therefore has a unique experience of the change process in relation to their particular professional context (cf. Cole, 1996). Policy ambitions therefore start to become less generic and are instead applied to a particular context within which a practitioner works; it is only at this point that specific tensions and contradictions between what is desired and what is seen to be achievable come to light. This is evident in the attempts to promote; partnership working, participation of children and young people, developing a commercial approach and the introduction of outcome based accountability. The response to change in both years is therefore seen to be an individual phenomenon with the new approach to professional practice being individually interpreted, defined and created (cf. Vygotsky, 1978).

This individualised response to the demands of the change process is evident throughout strategic and operational layers of Children's Services and in both periods the newly appointed senior managers could be seen to go through a learning process in which they attempt to come to terms with the new professional environment. Despite the difference in the rationales for change in 2004 and 2012, both sets of senior managers come to the same conclusion: that a change in the philosophy of those working within Children's Services was needed in order to create a "collective

identity” (Holland *et al*, 2008, p.91) rather than the introduction of a range of new services or acquisition of additional funding. Both sets of senior managers can therefore be seen to be trying to develop coherent structures which attempt to support, coordinate and communicate this philosophy to all of those working within Children’s Services rather than looking at specific models of service delivery.

### **6.3.2 The need for self-promotion**

Another feature of practice in 2012 is the recognition by operational practitioners of the need to market the work that they are doing so that their service area is valued by Councillors and senior managers who may in turn protect them from a further round of funding cuts. Although the need for self-promotion was less evident in 2004, practitioners were still aware of the need to publicise the success of their services so that they would be mainstreamed at the end of a particular funding stream. However, self-promotion in 2004 would have seemed at odds with the agenda of the time, which put the child and family at the heart of service delivery (Laming, 2003; DfES, 2003).

### **6.3.3 The influence of the practitioner**

Despite this desire for greater national guidance, practitioners, in both phases of the research, are seen to ignore certain aspects of policy which they do not individually value or deem important. This is particularly evident in the focus that the 2004 Act placed upon the participation of children and young people within the decision making process of Children’s Services which was not embraced or adopted by any practitioners in 2004 and is non-existent in 2012; or in the involvement of the

voluntary sector which was never embedded into practice in 2004 and again is non-existent in 2012. Practitioners can be seen to select aspects of national policy which they view as worthy of implementation and which they view as not. A similar pattern could also be seen to exist in the way that certain professional skills are valued at different times depending upon the overriding professional culture. This can be seen across the two periods and identified in the rise and fall of roles such as children's participation workers, integrated service managers, study support managers and currently with employees with proven income generation skills. This therefore supports both Avis (2010) and Giddens (2002) belief that there is a need for the modern day Children's Service practitioner to be able to adapt to the demands of an ever changing professional context rather than simply possessing a particular set of core skills.

#### **6.3.4 The consistent presence of partnership working**

One of the key features of professional practice however, that has remained of significant importance is the need for agencies belonging to different organisations to work in partnership for the good of all vulnerable children and young people (cf. Edwards, 2004). Partnership working therefore is not only seen as a strategic ambition but can now be seen to be a feature of everyday practice. Despite embracing partnership working in this way it is somewhat surprising to find that there remains a general lack of awareness of the aims and objectives of 'other' professionals and agencies in both 2004 and 2012. This lack of awareness is evident throughout the layers of Children's Services; from senior strategic positions to those who are much more operationally focussed and is possibly explained by the

traditional hierarchical management systems which remain in place and prevent the full integration of professionals from a range of different agencies and again demonstrate how historical structures and practice continues to influence and shape current provision (cf. Engeström, 1999).

### **6.3.5 The ongoing tension between the Voluntary Sector and the Local Authority**

As mentioned in Chapter Five, the voluntary sector remains '*outside*' of the Council, throughout both phases of the research, with neither the voluntary or statutory sector agencies showing any desire to work together. Despite the antipathy which is evident between the Council and the voluntary sector; working in partnership is a recognised as an important aspect of the work of all the interviewees. However, as has been stated before this is no longer because of the Children Act but now takes place because it allows practitioners to achieve a shared object (cf. Engeström, 2001) such as: meeting the needs of child and young people with the most complex of need or supporting the delivery of Family Connect. However, despite the development of new partnership working arrangements, there remains a risk that new '*effective*' ways of working cannot embed because of the ever changing policy context.

## **6.4 Contradictions evident between categories within the Children's Services activity system**

Following the undertaking of the interviews, it did not come too much of a shock to find that the most commonly referred to categories within the first phase of the



research were; object, rules and division of labour. However, despite this particular emphasis upon certain categories, it is also possible to identify particular contradictions that were evident between the activity system categories which could be seen to prevent the achievement of positive outcomes for children, young people and their families. These *'inter-nodal'* contradictions were seen to be evident between:

- **Subject and the object.** *Practitioners often fulfilled multiple professional roles which presented numerous versions of the subject which caused tension with the practitioner's ability to work on a particular object.*
  - **Tools and the object.** *Throughout the research there was a lack of tools available to assist practitioners to work upon their specific object.*
  - **Division of Labour and the object.** *The tension that existed between the voluntary and the statutory sector agencies prevented partnership working across the children's trust (which was a primary object in phase one of the research).*
- Rules and the object.** *When analysing the interview transcripts it was often difficult to clarify which took precedence for practitioners whether it was following of council rules or achieving better outcomes for children and young people. Following the rules had become the object of the work of a number of practitioners.*

In the second phase of the research *rules* continued to be a significant category with *object, tools and division of labour* also being a focus of discussion during the interviews. However, there did seem to be fewer *inter-nodal* contradictions than in

phase one of the research primarily as a result of the considerable reduction in the size of the Children's Service team and the absence of a children's trust structure. The *inter-nodal* contradictions that were seen to be evident in phase two of the research are presented below:

- **Rules and the object.** *One of the main objectives of many of the practitioners was the focus upon developing an entrepreneurial approach to their work however the traditional bureaucratic approach of the council consistently prevented this to develop. The use of the term 'customer' rather than 'service user' also seemed at odds when working with vulnerable children and their families.*
- **Tools and the object.** *The use of outcome based accountability computer software, although yet to be introduced, did seem to cause some tension between the object of supporting vulnerable children and their families.*
- **Division of labour and the object.** *The object of creating a seamless multi-agency team via family connect was challenged by the different ways of working between the different professionals.*

## **6.5 Triangulating the results of the interview transcripts**

As explained in Chapter Four, a questionnaire was given to all interviewees in 2012, following the completion of the semi-structured interview. The questionnaires (Appendix one) consisted of selected statements that were made in 2004, with interviewees being asked to indicate if they either agreed or disagreed with the statements; using a five point scale which ranged from "Strongly agree" to "strongly

disagree". Respondents were also given an option to respond "neither" if they felt that they were not in a position to comment. Change in practice could therefore be seen to have taken place if an interviewee disagreed with a particular statement; with an agreement to a statement indicating that no change was evident. The analysis of the questionnaires took place prior to the analysis of the 2012 interview transcripts. I was therefore unaware of the significance that these would have until this analysis had taken place. The outcomes of the questionnaire are presented below.

Most respondents view the Council as a place of change. However, two interviewees disagreed with the statement that; "Things are always changing and therefore initiatives cannot embed", perhaps reflecting a reduction in the pace of change following the recent restructure and implementation of a new Children's Service strategy. This move towards a more stable and efficiently run Council environment also seems to be supported by the response to the statement that claimed "The major tool is the money" with only 5 out of 10 respondents believing that this remains the case.

Another significant shift can be seen to have taken place in the attitudes that interviewees have towards partnership working with 6 out of the 10 respondents no longer believing that; "Partnership working is difficult because of the time it take to facilitate" and 9 out of the 11 believing that; "The more who work towards a goal common goal the more the impact will be". This does seem to highlight the way that partnership working has become embedded into what could be considered mainstream practice: which was a specific aim of the 2004 Children Act. However,

uncertainty in understanding the needs of children remains, with only 2 out of the 9 respondents disagreeing with the statement; “participation of children and young people is underestimated and the problems are not understood”. Unlike partnership working the participation of children and young people does not seem to have been incorporated into mainstream practice and again highlights the central role that professionals play in selecting and translating the government’s policy ambitions into their own professional practice.

One of the most significant outcomes of the questionnaire is the response by the interviewees to the statement, “It all seems to be education”, with only 2 out of the 10 respondents agreeing. This perhaps highlights another successful outcome of the 2004 Children Act, which attempted to develop a more holistic approach to education which involved a wide range of professional agencies. It also suggests that professionals have yet to respond to the coalition government’s ambitions to turn attention back onto schools through the introduction of Academies and Free Schools (DfE, 2010) and away from the concept of holistic, multiagency Children’s Services. The change in professional focus away from schools is also supported by the fact that only 3 out of 10 respondents disagreed with the statement that schools had become “more outward looking”. However, despite this shift away from schools, Headteachers are still seen by 6 out of the 10 respondents as potentially “causing a problem”, reflecting the tension that still exists between children’s service practitioners and local schools.

The extent to which change has become embedded into professional practice, however, is not as significant as I might have expected prior to undertaking the research with the remainder of the statements producing little or no disagreements. Certain principles therefore seem to pervade and remain universally accepted in both 2004 and 2012 regardless of the dominant policy discourse or pervading economic circumstance. These principles can be summarised as being;

- Changing the attitudes of practitioners is more important than the setting up of new initiatives.
- A balance is needed between moving something an agenda forward and keeping practitioners informed with the latest developments.
- Clear lines of communication, including feedback mechanisms, need to be in place
- Services provided by the Council should be needs led.

However, despite these common principles being evident in both 2004 and 2012, it is interesting to note that all practitioners believe that there has been “A change in the way that professionals work”. Change in the role and function of those that work within this area could therefore be treated as a continual feature of their working environment (Castells, 2000; Giddens, 2002); flexibility and adaptability are therefore much needed characteristics of a children’s service professional if they are to survive in this ever changing professional environment.

## **6.6 Learning lessons from a period of transition**

The identification of similarities and differences in practice between 2004 and 2012 presented above provides insight into the factors which have been instrumental in influencing professional practice within and between the two phases of data collection. From this comparison it is possible to identify features which play a significant role in the transformation of professional practice. These are presented below.

### **6.6.1 An individual interpretation of the object**

Individual practitioners are seen to interpret their own respective professional environment individually which makes it very challenging to create a collective identity through government policy (DfES, 2004; DfE, 2011). Practitioners also seem to identify themselves with the team that they work with more than with the Council that employs them. This dual identity, if left unmanaged, is seen to create confusion and result in '*spaghetti like*' structures in which no overall coherence exists. This lack of unity can also create an environment in which internal business units and external agencies compete against each other rather than work cohesively; potentially resulting in an inefficiency and duplication. The individual interpretation of practice by practitioners can therefore be seen to create short-lived networks (Castells, 2000) between professionals which share the same goal.

### **6.6.2 The need to develop a shared object**

The introduction of an abstract concept, such as a Children's Trust (DfES, 2004), in order to engender a unified approach seems to have little meaning for practitioners

and therefore has no impact upon their professional practice which only takes place once it has been articulated as a shared object (Engeström, 2001) of their work activity; such as, working in partnership or adopting a business-like approach. A strategic plan which is based upon a review of local outputs and outcomes rather than an external policy directive is therefore seen to be a more efficient way to direct change and reduce duplication of work. This does not mean that this is a simplistic process and I acknowledge the challenge that there is in developing a shared understanding across practitioners within an organisation as complex as a local authority, which employs many thousands of people, however, the introduction of new concepts cannot be seen to be effective if they are not translated into something which practitioners can comprehend and understand (cf. Avis, 2010).

### **6.6.3 The need for a clear strategic vision**

The development of a unified approach (DfES, 2001; DfES, 2004) is not helped when senior strategic managers are confused. This confusion was particularly evident in 2004 and it was seen to filter down through the strategic and operational layers within the organisation and contributed to the development of a highly complex and inefficient organisational structure. In short, it would appear that the clearer the strategic vision is, the better it can be communicated throughout the organisation and the more purposeful the work within the organisation can become. Senior managers therefore play a central role in setting the strategic direction for those in operational positions to interpret and follow; the clearer this vision the better this is. Senior managers therefore need time to develop genuine understanding of the implications

of any proposed changes if strategic plans are going to be effectively communicated and successfully implemented.

#### **6.6.4 The need for a clear management structure**

Although the 2004 Children Act attempted to change the practice of those who work with children and families it did not give sole authority or responsibility to any individuals to direct or facilitate this change. Instead it created a highly complex environment in which decisions over professional practice either went unmonitored or were made jointly via management boards and other forms of communal governance which did not have the powers to directly influence or challenge individual practice. A middle ground can therefore be seen to have been established in an attempt to placate the range of different approaches and perspectives which were evident within the multi-agency management boards; which did little to transform working practices.

#### **6.6.5 The limitations of policy and funding upon the transformation of professional practice**

The policy directives of 2004, together with the restructure of 2012, both had a specific objective to transform practice; and in both of these years practitioners relied upon a limited range of tools (Vygotsky, 1978) in order to facilitate this change. These tools tended to be orientated around 'information sharing' which took place between different stakeholders and reflect Vygotsky's (1978) importance that he placed upon language in shaping professional behaviour. These networks (Castells, 2000) could therefore be seen to create a short-lived support structure for practitioners to help achieve the objects of their work related activity.



Despite the significant difference in funding invested in the two periods, practitioners share a similar view as to the effectiveness that introducing new funding can bring; this being' the creation of new services and associated increase in capacity. However, it is not seen as something which directly impacts upon or influences the way practitioners undertake their professional duties. Funding is therefore not seen as an effective tool to change workplace behaviour especially when the funding is short-term and projects short-lived. Government policy is also not seen as being particularly effective in achieving a change in professional practice, and, as with funding, it can actually be seen to have a predominantly negative impact once the policy comes to an end and a change in policy introduced.

#### **6.6.6 The need to align national and local plans**

National policy, especially in 2011 can also at times be seen to conflict with locally developed strategic plans and can therefore prevent a desired transformation in professional behaviour taking place as practitioners have to ensure that both national policy and local plans are placated. Professional practice is therefore seen to develop through a process of negotiation from which "cultural knowledge" (Holland *et al*, 2008, p. 100) is seen to be produced which results in the development of the parameters within which the practitioner must operate.

#### **6.6.7 The need to provide a sense of job security**

Job security is, of course, a major issue and occupied the minds of almost all of those interviewed. Self-promotion is therefore another tool which has, and continues to play, a significant role in professional practice as practitioners strive to be

'mainstreamed' (in 2004) or saved from redundancy (in 2012). The limited time span of many of the initiatives puts added pressure upon many of the operationally focussed practitioners to demonstrate positive early outcomes in order to "*grab the headlines*" and ensure job security. This process of self-marketing, however, does seem to raise the possibility that the identified outcomes of particular services or initiatives are exaggerated or even fictionalised so that their particular service area looks as effective as possible and value for money. This inevitably means that those who are good at self-promotion will have a higher profile than those who are not regardless of the effectiveness of their services and can be seen to be another example of Engeström's (2001) concept of multi-voicedness within the Children's Service activity system.

The need "*to be seen to be doing your job as opposed to simply doing your job*" is therefore seen to be as a direct result of practitioners feeling vulnerable due to the potential threat of future redundancy and the realisation that they must be able to demonstrate the impact that their role is having to senior managers and local Councillors to ensure their employment. This inevitably must detract attention away from their core duties and therefore impact upon the effectiveness of their respective services; however it is a feature of current practice that may be challenged once the system of "*outcome based accountability*" is fully introduced. However I, together with a number of those interviewed in 2012, remain sceptical about the effectiveness of computer software in assessing the true effectiveness of Children's Services.

#### **6.6.8 The need to develop a new collective professional identity**

The *rules* that practitioners have to follow seem to have the most influence on practice and can be seen to define the object of Children's Service professionals. Different organisations, agencies and Council teams, although working within a similar professional context can be seen to have very different rules to follow (cf. Daniels, 2011) which means that it can become very challenging for practitioners to work together cohesively. The education focus of many of the initiatives in 2004 typified this tension with many of the non-school based agencies finding it difficult to fully engage with their school based counter parts. The distinct professional identities that some of the agencies have developed, create a form of territorialism which has developed over time to produce what the lead for specialist services (2004 or 2012) described as "*associated baggage*", which causes tension between individual professions which does seem to prevent cohesive working.

#### **6.6.9 The disconnect between external inspection regimes and local practice**

External inspection regimes can also be seen to create a tension which challenges the development of new localised practice as practitioners struggle to achieve the strategic ambitions of the Council while at the same time satisfy the assessment criteria of organisations such as Ofsted. This is particularly evident with Children's Services, wherein the development of an efficient multi-method assessment and delivery mechanism such as Family Connect in 2012 is not necessarily conducive to the recommendations laid out within the Munro review (DfE, 2011) which promotes a single method approach to the assessment of children's needs. The Council

therefore need to consider the expectations of external inspection agencies with the strategic ambitions of the Council to ensure that these are mutually conducive.

#### **6.6.10 The need to develop new rules to promote new ways of working**

Although there has been a reduction in the directedness of national policy, the Council is seen to be adopting a much more focussed and efficient way of working however, traditional Council bureaucracy can be seen to hinder this development and create multi-voicedness (Engeström, 2001) which prevent the adoption of the new customer focused and business orientated approach, as desired by the Chief Executive of the Council in 2012. Barriers such as this can be seen to cause frustration for those trying to adopt a more flexible and innovative approach as they have to “*waste time*” following Council procedure rather than focusing upon their core business. Attention therefore needs to be given to streamlining existing Council systems and protocols to ensure that the Council can survive in an increasingly dynamic and business minded environment.

Complex internal processes are therefore seen to create confusion for practitioners within the same and different organisations which seems to prevent the development of a unified approach. This creates a challenge for anyone with responsibility for the co-ordination of services, across statutory and non-statutory boundaries, if traditional hierarchical forms of management are adopted; as these do not facilitate the fluid and often short-lived relationships which exist when operational partnerships are developed (Castells, 2000; Holland *et al*, 2008). It therefore could be concluded that the introduction of a range of new initiatives, as in 2004, which attempt to transform

professional behaviour across all statutory and non-statutory agencies, have numerous associated challenges and barriers to overcome. If change is therefore genuinely desired, organisations must provide professionals with the freedom and flexibility to operate without the restrictions of set structures and processes which attempt to monitor and control change in a historically outdated manner within which macro scale management can be seen to inhibit micro scale behaviour (cf. Daniels, 2012).

#### **6.6.11 The need for stability**

A lack of stability which is evident within a large organisation, such as a local authority, because of the ever-changing political climate, also creates a sense of insecurity as professionals are unable to control their environment; leading to a reactive rather than proactive approach. As a result of this uncertainty the division of labour evident within the Council is constantly changing as different practitioner based skills are valued differently at different times for different reasons (cf. Avis, 2010). Despite the willingness of practitioners to endure this sense of insecurity and constant change within their work environment, it does inevitably distract them from their primary work objectives. However, some change may be beneficial and the recent removal of a layer of middle managers is seen to reduce the complexity of the Council and allowed practitioners to have facilitated a new operationally focussed approach.

#### **6.6.12 The need for new flexible ways of working**

The community within which people work also seems to form organically and does not seem to be created through policy directives. However, as with the division of labour, a change in the object of the work of professional's does inevitably have a direct impact upon the community within which they work. There, therefore does not seem to be a simple connection between the creation and introduction of a rule, or set of rules, with an actual achievement of a desired outcome (cf. Engeström, 1999, 2001). A much more fluid relationship is therefore seen to be needed whereby professionals respond to specific stimuli, such as the fear of redundancy, and then create their own rules, division of labour and community in order that they best achieve their desired outcomes (cf. Castells, 2000; Fuller *et al*, 2005; and Holland *et al*, 2008). It is also seen to be very difficult to predict any outcomes from work related activity; ensuring the welfare of vulnerable children and young people within an increasingly business orientated environment will therefore prove to be difficult.

#### **6.6.13 The need to learn lessons from current and previous practice**

There is no evidence of any formal knowledge transfer mechanisms being in place in either 2004 or 2012 to facilitate learning and promote new ways of working throughout and within the children's service environment, which Edwards (2004) and Avis (2010) see as essential. Attention, therefore, now needs to be given to the assessment of the outcomes of work related activity to ensure that these are appropriate and effective, and if so, are allowed to embed and sustain future professional practice. The Council therefore need to invest time and energy in their concept of Family Connect and be prepared to monitor and assess how it functions

so that improvements, over time, can be made; rather simply move away from this approach once a new directive is issued. The findings of evaluations of all aspects of the effectiveness of Family Connect therefore need to be fed into the decision making process of the Council so that these decisions are based upon robust evidence. This increased level of internal rigour is now needed more than ever as the level of national policy reduces and the amount of localised outcome based accountability increases in order to that future strategic decisions are based upon robust evidence. However, despite the significant reduction in the influence of the central government the current focus upon targeted support (DfE, 2010 and DfE, 2011) has meant that there are now families who are not poor enough to access free support and not wealthy enough to be able to pay for the services they require. This means that these families have to become (or be assessed as) more vulnerable and more in need, in order to access support. This is, of course, a situation which is far from ideal.

## **6.7 Conclusion**

One of the most striking features of the changes that have occurred in professional practice is the inability to predict a particular practitioner response to policy or organisational change. There is no predictable stimulus/response mechanism to changing professional behaviour; changes in practice are be affected by so many variables that it becomes almost impossible to predict a particular outcome. However, there is one constant in all of the changes, presented above, and that is that the practitioner lies at the heart of any change process and will therefore

determine whether any change is achievable. Change is therefore practitioner and not organisationally facilitated.

We now move on to Chapter Seven which brings together all the elements of the research that has been presented and discussed and reflects upon the effectiveness of CHAT as a theoretical framework and underlying theory for the research which focuses upon human behaviour within everyday work environments. I also reflect upon the effectiveness of the selected research design and methodology and focus upon the key findings of the study, its practice implications and its original contribution to knowledge.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### CONCLUSION

#### 7.1 Introduction

It is customary for doctoral researchers to reflect upon their research as a kind of learning journey. However, my thesis truly is the product of living through a period of transformation in understandings of Children's Services in England and my own efforts to understand organisational learning and practice in cultural and historical terms. The quasi-longitudinal design of the research provides a rare opportunity to analyse and compare the lived experience of Children's Service professionals between two distinct periods in the recent history of Children's Services; with the findings providing unique insight into the factors which promote and hinder transformation of workplace behaviour whilst also providing an opportunity to test out a range of relevant theoretical perspectives.

The findings of this investigation have identified a shift wherein partnership working is being driven to a greater extent by outcomes in relation to children and families and by a new *business-like* approach which is seen by practitioners to be redefining the skills set required of the Children's Service professional. The findings also illustrate the limited role that government policy plays in shaping daily practice: how policy is lived. The concluding discussion also highlights the need for senior managers to translate national policy into localised practice, into localised culture, via a clearly articulated strategic vision.

## **7.2 The origins of the research**

The research process evolved over a twelve year period during which time I left teaching and started to work for a local authority. The move from a secondary school, within which a number of senior managers monitored and controlled all aspects of the working week, into a local authority environment within which I had complete professional freedom came as something of a shock and initiated my interest into all aspects of organisational culture. In particular, it made me reflect upon the effectiveness of large public sector organisations and question their ability to adapt to the demands of an ever changing social and policy context.

The period in which the research was undertaken saw two different political administrations elected; three prime ministers take office and the introduction of two highly significant pieces of legislation in the form of the 2004 Children Act (DfES, 2004) and 2011 Education Act (DfE, 2010). It was also a time when the UK economy deteriorated from a position of significant strength as a result of a global economic crisis to one of recession and economic uncertainty (Biressi and Nunn, 2014; Evans, 2012 and Rapoport and Gerts, 2010).

As the governmental reforms started to be implemented I became increasingly sceptical about the potential that existed for change, largely because of the mechanisms that senior managers had introduced in order to facilitate the professional transformation demanded by the 2004 Children Act which were often in the form of a staff training day or through monthly briefing sessions; which could only be attended by those in specific managerial positions. The one dimensional nature

of these methods, which involved a simple didactic approach, seemed insufficient to change professional behaviour, across a highly complex organisation, to the extent that was necessary. In contrast, the analytical framework of my doctoral research has, I believe, offered far richer insights into these and other factors which were influential in transforming professional behaviour.

### **7.3 The phases of the research journey**

Phase one of the research took place in 2004 when I invited members of the Children's Fund management board to take part in my research; which at the time aimed to assess the impact of the 2004 Children Act. I selected the Children's Fund management board as the focus of my data collection because it was made up of a range of professionals that represented agencies from across Children's Services; including representation from the voluntary sector. The focus of the Children's Fund board was to spearhead transformation across Children's Services, therefore all of the board members were involved in the change process necessitated by the 2004 Act, and represented a range of professionals in strategic and operational positions. Nine practitioners eventually agreed to take part in the research; with all seeming to see the interview process as a way of making sense of the changes that had only recently been introduced. The objectives set out in the *Every Child Matters: Green Paper* (DfES, 2003) was certainly seen to be a particularly daunting objective which gave little in the way of direction or focus for those with responsibility of creating the new Children's Service. It was also a time when practitioners from different agencies were working together for the first time, bringing with them their own professional vocabulary and culture. On reflection, there seemed to be extensive activity taking

place but, following initial analysis of the interview transcripts, it became increasingly clear that little, in terms of outcomes for children and families, seemed to have been achieved.

Phase two of the study took place eight years later and in that time the world of public services had changed beyond recognition. I no longer worked within the same local authority and barely recognised the organisation that I had left only three years before. The transformation that had taken place was one that was focused upon the reduction of the workforce in an attempt to cope with the ever shrinking financial resources. As a result I faced my first major dilemma of the data collection: this being that most of the initial interviewees no longer worked for the local authority. Once I had developed a strategy to overcome this and selected an alternate sample which matched the one used in 2004 I was pleased to find that once again all interviewees were eager to take part in the interview process; with a number of the interviewees feeling that it had been a cathartic experience following such a stressful rationalisation process. The interviews of 2012 seemed much more insightful than the interviews of 2004 with participants much more comfortable with their new Children's Service environment.

#### **7.4 Activity Theory as a tool for research**

One of the key challenges for my research was in trying to define 'professional behaviour' and also in deciding how this could be identified and assessed. In order to achieve this I drew heavily upon Cultural Historical Activity Theory (Cole, 1996) which offered a way of defining behaviour and also a framework which would help

structure the data collection process. CHAT uses an activity system as the minimum unit of analysis and is made up of a number of categories which interact to influence and shape human behaviour (Engeström, 1999). Although I found that this provided useful insight into my research area, I found little guidance as to how this should be practically implemented as a research tool. I was therefore initially unsure as to how I should position an activity system within my research; whether a single activity system should represent the local authority or whether it should be made up a number of intersecting activity systems. I eventually decided to analyse each of the interview transcripts and then layer the findings from them to create a collective system which presented all interviewee perspectives. By doing this I was able to reflect individual perspectives into the complex world of Children's Services and not present a homogenised or overly simplified view of the organisation as a whole.

Although embedded within a highly complex theoretical approach the concept of an activity system proved to be a very useful tool for investigating professional behaviour and allowed for a consistent comparison of the findings between; all interviewees within and across each phase of data collection (2004 and 2012). The different categories within an activity system allowed me to examine each interview from a variety of different perspectives. In this way it avoided the very thing that Vygotsky (Kozulin, 1986) was all too well aware of; that of using consciousness to analyse consciousness.

The concept of historicity and multi-voicedness as described by Engeström (2001) are also highly suited concepts for a longitudinal research study which necessitates a

comparison of multiple responses within and between two dates. In fact these two concepts can be seen to underpin the study; with the concept of historicity acknowledging the extent to which practice is informed and influenced by the previous generations; and “multi-voicedness” (Engeström, 2001) accounting for the contradictions and tensions within the system, which if resolved, may offer the potential for practice to be changed and transformed. Multi-voicedness (Engeström, 2001) in particular creates a particularly useful principle in that once identified it can become the focus for future transformation of practice. It therefore provides the opportunity for the research findings to be of practical operational value, however there is no direction as to how each of these concepts can and should be identified and applied which can and did create a certain degree of uncertainty at the early stages of data analysis.

Another feature of the research was the link that was created, from the outset, between the theoretical approach and research design. The use of a consistent theoretical approach and unit of measurement created a robust audit trail which provides clarity to the research process that prior to the research I was unaware of and which can only add to the validity of the research findings. However, activity theory also creates challenges for the researcher; which at times causes uncertainty. This uncertainty forced me to re-examine certain activity theoretical principles which manifested itself during the analysis of my first interview transcript.

As I read the first transcript I became increasingly unsure as to the perspective that I was interpreting and analysing the data from i.e. when analysed from my perspective

the coding was different than when I was looking at it from the perspectives of the interviewee. An example of this can be seen in a discussion by one of the interviewees of the rules that they followed at work. The reference to rules would seem to necessitate the same activity system category however, when I examined the same reference through the eyes of the interviewee it became increasingly evident that the focus upon rules was actually the object of their work: a very different finding. It is easy to see how this interplay between the researcher and the participant's perspectives can cause ambiguity in the analysis of research data. The challenge of selecting the appropriate perspective through which to examine the interview transcripts was further highlighted through the interpretation and application of the subject category. This confusion stems from the uncertainty as to what actually constitutes an activity system. As I have mentioned I chose to develop a comprehensive picture of the local authority by combining all the interview transcripts. However, prior to this taking place I had to treat each interviewee as though they were the subject of their own particular activity system by placing the interviewee as the subject. This may be at odds with Engeström's (1999) conceptualisation of an activity system and it did present an over simplification of its dynamics. The reason being that a number of the interviewees fulfilled a variety of roles which had a unique set of rules they had to work to. The presentation of a singular subject is therefore potentially misleading, however, to attempt to capture this ever shifting dynamic would be impossible and distract from the focus of the research. My response to this confusion was to take a simple interpretation and view the subject as being represented as the lens through which the activity is seen.

When all the analysis templates were combined, the subject was then seen to encapsulate the perspective of all the interviewees.

This confusion as to the interpretation of CHAT categories however, is not limited to the *subject* with each of the categories proving difficult to define and apply in a consistent and appropriate manner. This however, is not a criticism of CHAT as Engeström never intended the categories to be used as a relatively simplistic research tool but serve as issues that the researcher does need to consider should they choose to use CHAT to inform and guide their research.

## **7.5 Key Findings of the research**

The focus of this thesis is the analysis of human behaviour: an area which causes a number of challenges as it is hard to define and capture. This thesis, however, does not shy away from this challenge and attempts to navigate through this landscape in an attempt to understand the impact that a significant period of change, in the history of state funded services for children and young people, had on the practitioners, so that lessons can be learnt for future periods of transformation.

The findings of this analysis highlight the unstable nature of professional behaviour, between 2004 and 2012, together with the confusion that existed during these periods of change and transformation of practice. This uncertainty is perhaps not surprising, considering the size and complexity of the agencies that were undergoing restructure and it challenges Lave and Wenger's (1999, p.23) concept of a relatively stable "community of practice". However the confusion evident did seem to resonate



with Vygotsky's (Cole *et al*, 1997) notion that learning is underpinned by discontinuity, conflict and displacement but seems at odds with any attempt to map out this process in a logical sequence of events, such as Engeström's (1999) concept of an expansive learning cycle. The findings of the research therefore seem to support an understanding of human behaviour which is complex, idiosyncratic but with occasional phases of cohesion around certain key processes. In this way Engeström's concept of "negotiated networking" (2004, p. 153) seems particularly applicable, as does Holland's *et al* (2008, p.91) concept of "collective identity" and Castells (2000) concept of a network in which individuals work together on short-term projects in a process of forming and reforming their behaviour.

The data collected therefore provided an opportunity for these theoretical perspectives to be tested within a real life work environment in an attempt to capture and understand work place behaviour. However, the data also produced findings which relate specifically to the practice of Children's Service professionals. These are summarised below.

- Government imposed policy is not seen by a majority of the practitioners to be an effective way to transform professional practice. The reason for this is due to the centrality that individual practitioners have within their own respective activity, which ensures that all policies must go through a process of individual, personal interpretation.

- Transformation of practice should therefore stem from practitioners rather than policy and policy makers who are divorced from the reality of practice. If government policy is to become more effective it must therefore take into consideration the local context within which it is to be implemented otherwise it risks causing confusion, frustration and conflict with localised plans and practice.
- A clearly articulated vision must be given and communicated to all those who work within an organisation if change is to be successfully implemented. Individual managers within the organisation also need to have authority to implement change and intervene swiftly if the desired transformation is not achieved. Purposeful change is therefore not seen to happen by accident and specific tools need to be identified which help facilitate this desired transformation, at different phases of transformation process.
- Self-interest is one of the most significant factors to influence professional practice. Individual practitioners in this study see themselves in direct competition with their colleagues and therefore feel the need to compete with them in order to remain in employment. A sense of job security could therefore stabilise an organisation and allow the practitioner to focus upon their core work objectives.
- Finally, one of the most significant findings is the central role that rules play in the day to day life of professionals. Practitioners can be seen to lose sight of their job purpose and concentrate on following the rules that they have personally identified as important. It is therefore necessary to re-examine the rules that practitioners have to follow and remove those that prevent practitioners from

working effectively. The research findings demonstrate that once free of these rules practitioners develop new ways of working which allow them to best achieve their work objectives. The focus should therefore be on the object and not the rules of work related activity.

## **7.6 Limitations of the research**

Any research that attempts to understand human behaviour is going to face certain challenges and this was certainly the case for this study which took a number of years to conceptualise and to translate into a practical piece of research. Despite the length of time it took for me to develop a suitable approach to the research, the study still contains a number of limitations which do affect the validity of the findings or at the very least must be taken into consideration when reading the study and assessing its merits.

The first of these limitations is the relatively small number of participants that took part in the research. Although the participants represent a cross section of the stakeholders that work in Children's Services they only represent a fraction of the thousands of the practitioners which work for the Council and related agencies and organisations. The sample was initially identified from the management group which had been formed in order to implement the Children's Fund (DfES, 2001) initiative and therefore was heavily involved in a process of professional change and transformation. Although relevant to the focus of this study the fact that they were involved in change and transformation may also mean that they had a very different perspective to those that were, at the time, relatively unaffected by the change

process. I was also only able to re-interview four of the original ten participants in the second phase of the research which therefore prevented a comparison of how the behaviour of specific practitioners had changed over the intervening period. However, those that were chosen to replace those that had left the authority had all been employed in a similar role during the period of research and therefore did compensate for the fact that they had not been interviewed in phase one of the study.

The focus upon one local authority also suggests certain limitations in that it only captures the behaviour that was evident within a specific geographical area. The selected local authority also had a national reputation for change and innovation and had a recognised culture which was seen to promote a '*risk taking*' approach to work which was not replicated in other local authorities. However, despite this difference in approach to other local authorities the focus of the study is upon the factors which affect professional behaviour and I feel that these are easier to identify within organisations in which change is encouraged rather than in organisations that remain static and follow a much more conservative approach.

The dynamic nature of the Children's Services environment also seemed to cause some degree of confusion when I first started to compare and contrast behaviour between phase one and phase two of the study. It soon became evident that by 2012 virtually none of the policy drivers that were evident in 2004 were now in existence. This therefore seemed to challenge my initial aim which was to see how a particular policy had impacted upon practice; this is difficult when the policy is no longer in existence. However, I resolved this issue by simply accepting that this was

the reality of practice within Children's Services and that government policy is frequently introduced and superseded by other policy documents and directives. I took the view that the research should therefore attempt to capture this reality and rather than simply link back to the 2004 Children Act should simply maintain a focus upon the drivers that existed at the time rather than in satisfying my original research ambitions. Recognising the features that affect practice therefore became the focus of the research, rather than investigating how the 2004 Children Act played out in operational reality.

I also feel that the study might have been enhanced by including the impact that the changing practices had for the lives of the children and young people. This would have shed light upon the connection that there are between changing professional behaviour and the services those children and young people access. After all, it is the impact that Children's Services have upon the lives of children and young people that matters rather than in simply understanding the nuances of professional behaviour for its own sake.

## **7.7 Future research opportunities**

One way that this research could be developed further is by focusing upon specific activity system categories in order to obtain a more in-depth understanding of the interplay that exist between these. This could certainly apply to; subject, object and tool, which form the original mediational triangle as identified by Leont'ev (Kozulin, 1986) or; tools, object and rules which link together the categories which perhaps have been shown to have the most significance upon professional behaviour. This

focus upon specific categories will allow for a better understanding of how these relate together, and interact with each other, to influence behaviour.

During the time I have spent writing this thesis a number of well publicised inquiries have taken place (e.g. The Mid Staffordshire NHS Trust Foundation Trust Inquiry, 2012, and the Colchester Hospital Care Quality Commission Inquiry, 2013). The seriousness of the issues raised by the findings of these not only has potentially fatal consequences for those being cared for; it also questions the way in which these organisations are managed. I therefore believe that there is a genuine need for further research to be undertaken which focusses upon the way in which large public sector organisations are managed and practitioners behave.

The findings of this research study shed light upon the features of our professional context which are most influential in dictating professional practice. The development and implementation of a range of tools that support this transformation is another aspect of the research that lends itself to further research. The longitudinal aspects of the study could also be developed further with data collection taking place in another eight years to see if the features that I have identified above remain significant. A comparison with other local authorities or other public sector organisations would also offer potential for future research and shed further light upon the factors which affect professional behaviour.

## **7.8 Original contribution to knowledge**

The aim and purpose of any doctoral thesis is to make an original contribution to knowledge. I feel that this thesis achieves this on a number of levels; firstly, is the fact that I have had to translate many of the complex theoretical perspectives of CHAT into a practical research process. This has meant that a concept such as an activity system (Engeström, 1999) has had to be unpacked and applied to the context of the research. My study therefore presents insight into not only the meaning of an activity system but demonstrates how this unit of measurement and Cultural Historical Activity Theory can be applied to a large complex organisation.

I also feel that have undertaken a robust and consistent analysis of the factors which shaped professional practice in an era of unprecedented change and have produced findings which provide unique insight into the factors which are influential in facilitating and preventing the changing of professional practice within large complex public sector organisations. In particular, it has highlighted the significance that individual interpretations of national policy and individual *living out* of policy, plays within a large organisation. It therefore highlights the need for consideration to be given to individual employees when considering organisational transformation. After all, it is those individual professionals who ensure, on a daily basis, that whatever changes are wrought, children and families are safeguarded through the provision of Children's Services.

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## Appendix 1 – Questionnaire

| Descriptor   | Strongly Agree |  | Neither |  | Strongly Disagree |
|--|----------------|--|---------|--|-------------------|
| The more people who are working towards the same thing the more impact it will have.   |                |  |         |  |                   |
| It's all about changing philosophy rather than providing a range of new services.  |                |  |         |  |                   |
| It all seems to be education.  |                |  |         |  |                   |
| The major tool is the money.   |                |  |         |  |                   |
| Balance needed in terms of keeping people on board and pushing things forward.   |                |  |         |  |                   |
| Clear lines of communication are needed.   |                |  |         |  |                   |
| Personalities can cause problems especially head teachers.   |                |  |         |  |                   |
| Feedback mechanisms key to ensuring that stakeholders keep on board.   |                |  |         |  |                   |
| Structure of Council is not binding and people are open to change BUT things are always changing and therefore initiatives cannot embed. |                |  |         |  |                   |
| Concentration sometimes not on implementation.   |                |  |         |  |                   |
| One of the difficulties of partnership   |                |  |         |  |                   |

|   |  |  |  |  |  |
|---|--|--|--|--|--|
| working is the time that it takes to facilitate.  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Planning happens through individuals rather than structures.  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Education has become much more outward looking towards partners but they are not going out to join others' circles. |  |  |  |  |  |
| The concept of participation of children and young people is underestimated and the problems are not understood.    |  |  |  |  |  |
| There has been a change in the way people work. (Since 2004)  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Services are needs Lead   |  |  |  |  |  |

## Appendix 2 – Interview Schedule

|                     |  |
|---------------------|--|
| Name of interviewee |  |
| Job title           |  |

|                 |
|-----------------|
| Contact Details |
|-----------------|

|        |  |
|--------|--|
| Sector |  |
|--------|--|

|                   |  |
|-------------------|--|
| Date of interview |  |
|-------------------|--|

|                   |  |                |  |
|-------------------|--|----------------|--|
| Time of interview |  | Interview Code |  |
|-------------------|--|----------------|--|

|   |
|---|
| Could you please describe your current role?                                |
| What is its core purpose? What are the unwritten rules?                     |
| How do you know if you have been successful?                                |
| What factors/things help you to do your job? Can you give examples?         |
| What factors/things prevent you from doing your job? Can you give examples? |

How do you work most closely with? (Person/organisation). Are there any agencies that you have very little involvement with? (That you think you should have)

How has your job/role changed over the last 10 years – what have been the causes of this?

ECM set out to change practice. Did it work?

How would you describe Children's Services in 2012?

What 5 skills do you need to do your job?

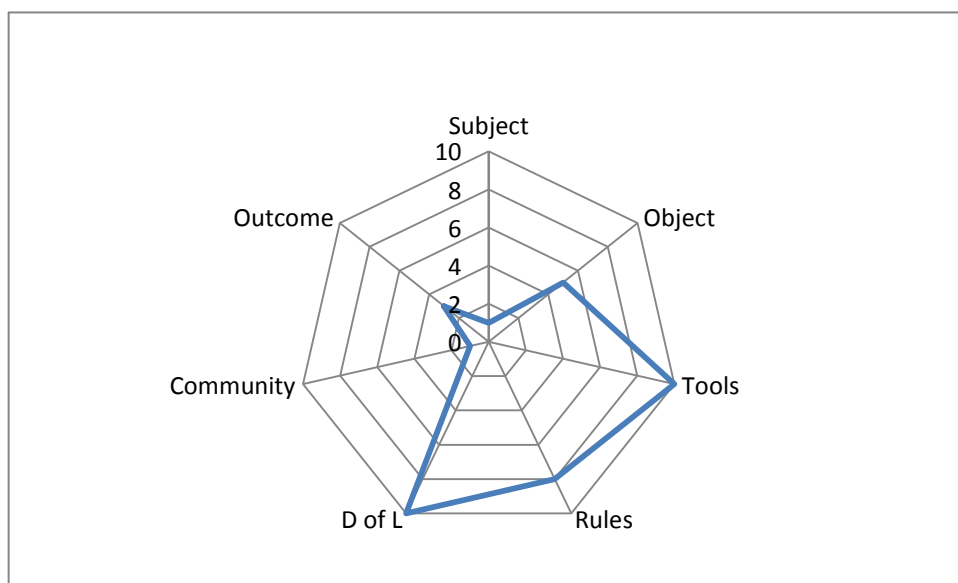
### Appendix 3 – Analysis Template

#### Analysis of interview transcript

#### Summary of role

A D. This is a complex area which covers all targeted services for C&YP.

#### Frequency of Codes



#### Feature of the activity system

- has a complex and demanding remit - includes a range of specific roles and teams which are aimed at supporting the child and family during times of need.
- sees his brief in a very regimented and strategic manner. Everything is very clear to him, very precise, targeted and simplistic.
- There is a new focused needs led approach to provision of services. eg. Need identified, services located and procured for specific families.
- is a systems man with a systems approach.
- Currently working with all strategic thinkers to develop a cohesive plan across Council and hold people to account! (But why now why not when they had the money?\_



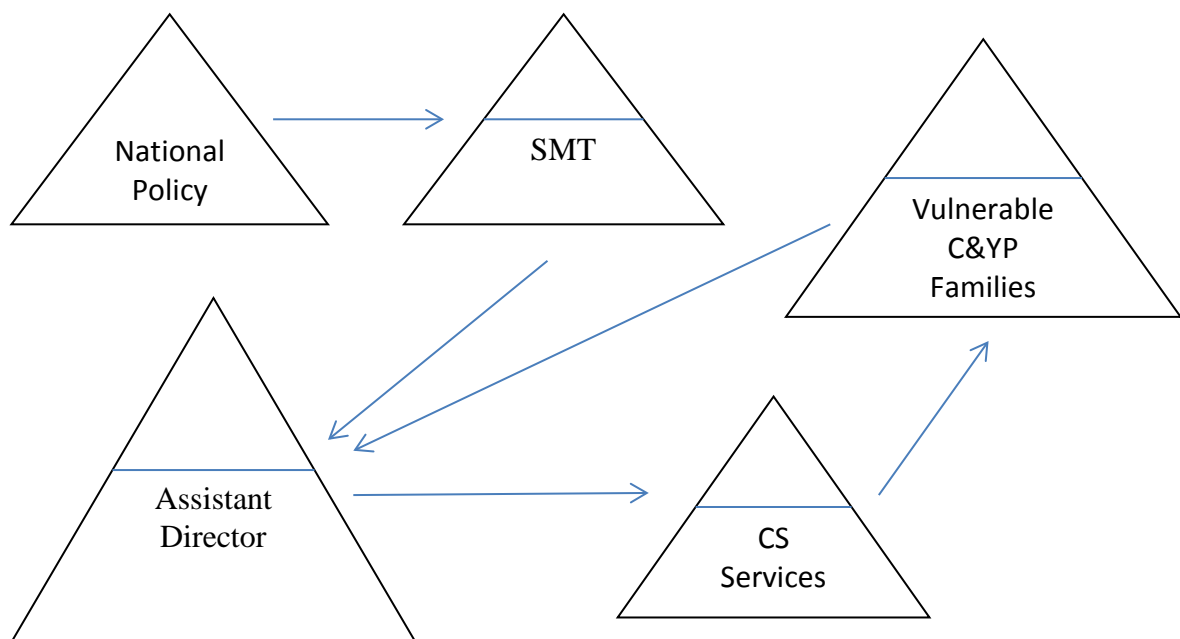
- Strategic vision is informed by:  
Local politicians  
National policy  
Smt chaired by chief exec
- Success is assessed on hard outcome data produced from performance management tools and frameworks. Accountancy based approach? Is this child and family friendly or a way of assessing a Council?
- Conscious decision of the Council to adopt a business attitude. This creates new rules and need new approach with new skills.
- Outcome of increased inefficiency is going to be fewer tiers of management and less duplication. e.g. 2004
- Restructure seen as a positive thing as it has given the opportunity to select the staff that want to be at Council and who share the Council's vision.
- was given role of producing a Council wide plan. He visited lots of people and came up with a strategic plan rather than just removing bits off the Council.
- A change in resources led to a change in approach. Family Connect created because it makes sense operationally as well interns of efficiency.
- **“You need to find what is needed. And then deliver not simply offer universal services”**. Totally at odds to 2004.
- Due to small size of the team in CS need to be smart with staff. Currently doing needs analysis to identify what staff training needs are.
- ECM seen as way of starting the process off but it was not finished. Now in business of really developing integrating working. This is now needed due to a reduction in resources. People now have to work smarter.

### **Contradictions and tensions within the system**

- Does not prevent issues only reacts to existing issues. How can this be an efficient approach?
- Council seen to get it wrong in 2005. Set it up as individual projects rather than bringing together as one integrated unit. Tension therefore between funding and efficiency.
- Too many managers delivering too many projects. It made is easy to restructure and select redundancies. More managers reduced efficiency.
- Tension between length of time it takes to collect data for OBA. And not enough actually using it. Why collect it then?
- Does not acknowledge learning from ECM . It created structure like spaghetti which was very confusing. This confused roles. Now more focused and

structured. Is this too simplistic?

- Also need to be more business orientated cause we 1. Have less money 2. need to be creative about making money 3. But still deliver services. Is business compatible with CS?
- Do work directly with community to understand how they can take “us forward” not solve poverty!
- In terms of outcomes there's no mention of CYP. All internally based. Child not at the centre.
- Outcome based accountability is now the adopted approach. But no evidence as to its effectiveness. Currently delivering “on a wing and a prayer”. Seems at odd with his systematic approach.
- Now much quicker to react to poor staffing issues and will remove those not up to the job. At a time when this is probably less needed.



### Quotes

We take a commissioning approach to everything we do now which is about identifying need first.

Well my role is a strategic role so I very much set the strategic direction and work with strategic colleagues internally and partner colleagues and one of the things we were doing is working with public health and adult & Children's Services and a proper co-operative commissioning strategy. One of the things we are doing now is working with health, adult services to produce a proper commissioning strategy where we use the (various plans) to inform the service delivery and we use that working with the strategic thinkers to develop that plan. Having put those plans into place it about holding people to account and managing issues as they arise.

AS a co-operative Council there's an expectation that we work with the communities

and we work with our workforce so one of the things we were looking to do for the work with strengthening the families is to work with the community to understand what they believe is right or wrong with services and understand their view how we can address some of the poverty issues out there with a view to putting services in place to take us forward.

looking to do is to bring someone in with a business background because one of the things we need to be aware of now is there is the right to challenge legislation and regulations and therefore we can be challenged about delivering services so we need to be much sharper and business focused and 1) because we've got less money and 2) to be creative about how we create and earn money and 3) how we deliver services as well. We need to have fewer tiers of management and remove the duplications we've got or had so we need a much sharper focus on those services are delivering an impact.

the thing about restructure is I would like to think that's giving us the opportunity to really weed out the people who wanted to be here and the ones who didn't; the ones who didn't have gone and we've got a really strong employee workforce who understand the vision we've got,

people talk about multi-agency working don't they but actually putting five agencies in a room doesn't do anything.

there was no genuine integrated system behind it

We got it wrong Paul which is my view, the government had lots of initiatives and what we did wrong was rather than integrate those projects into mainstream business we set them up as projects so we created a whole lot of silo's across the place and our view healthy schools, extended schools and services are actually all part of what we should have been doing anyway in early intervention services.

They were driven by national governments and they said 'have this' so we did and created a IRT team and healthy schools team and for every project that came from the government we had a different team with a different manager; too many managers and hence that's why it's quite difficult and it made the job of restructuring quite easy because you had too many managers.

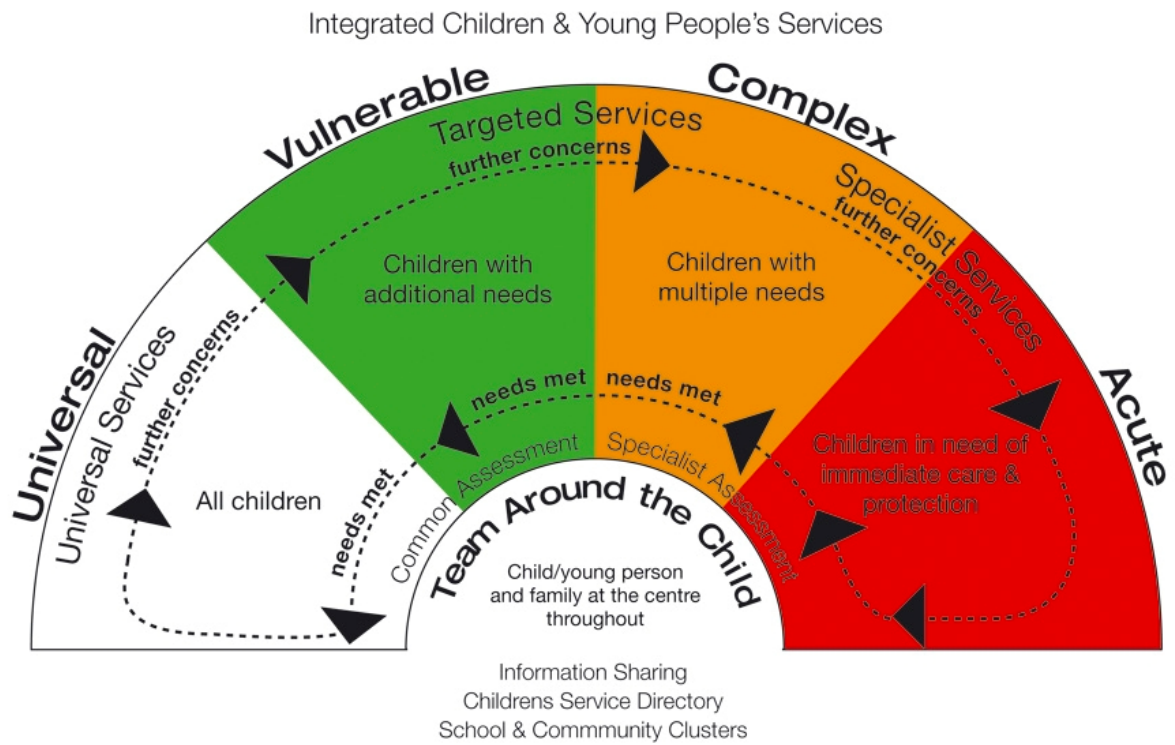
So what you're doing at the moment is delivering a service on a wing and a prayer really and Family Connect will help because for the first time CRM will allow us to crack everything that comes in.

You're hindered by case work that comes along at short notice that you can have a plan for something and something comes along and throws you like Ofsted and certainly that's the case in children's specialist services where you can get thrown on a social work case quite quickly, quality of staff can hinder you from time to time but you'll find us as an organisation now we'll respond a.s.a.p. now and we have to, you could say resources are a barrier but I'm not convinced resources are barriers but it's

not so much now because there is some funding available to build capacity if we need to and those sums are there.

Well Every Child Matters was good in terms of the way that it was a good start in terms of recognition, early intervention and prevention was more co-ordinated in a multi-agency way really and common systems etc

## Appendix 4 – Telford and Wrekin “Windscreen”



**Continuum of Needs**  
**(commonly known as The Windscreen)**