

**Incorporating Research into Practice: Exploring the Possibilities of Action  
Research for Child and Youth Care Practice**

**by**

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### ABSTRACT

There is no shortage of calls for child and youth care practitioners to become more involved in research in child and youth care. The literature on the development and professionalization of the field argues that, as a profession, child and youth care needs to continue to develop and strengthen its knowledge base through research in child and youth care work. This thesis explores the potential of action research as a method for incorporating research into child and youth care practice. It is proposed that both child and youth care practice and action research methodologies are grounded in context, founded in action, realized in relationship and focused on supporting the learning, growth and development of others. Through the compatibilities of these shared features, action research provides child and youth care practitioners with a way of reconceptualizing research so that it can become a part of their practice.

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## ***Chapter One***

### ***Introduction***

This thesis explores the potential of action research as a method for incorporating research into child and youth care. The genesis of this paper lies in my own beliefs that child and youth care practitioners need to become more involved in reflecting upon, evaluating and developing their own practice. As a child and youth care practitioner myself, I have often been at a loss as to how to do this. I have wanted to conduct research into my own practice but I have struggled with just how this could be accomplished.

This dilemma came to a head for me part way through the course work within this master's program. We had been asked to complete an assignment in which we were required to develop an intervention, a research and an education project proposal. As part of the development of these proposals we were required to draft, outline and discuss our ideas with our classmates and instructors. I had been working on developing a program in my child and youth care work that I fleshed out for my intervention piece. Fresh from our research courses, I also set out to design a research project that would evaluate the effectiveness of the program I was developing. I shared these ideas as required.

In the process of sharing, however, it became clear that there were problems with my research approach. I had tried to employ a basic pre-test, post-test experimental design and as our group discussed my proposal it

became clear that I needed to make some significant changes in order for the design to work. Much to my horror the consensus was that the best way to accomplish this was to adjust my intervention design as opposed to my evaluation design. I was flabbergasted. It was inconceivable to me that I should change my intervention design to accommodate the research. As a child and youth care practitioner this did not make sense to me. My intervention design was child, youth and family focused and flexibly responsive to the needs of the clients it served. These were sacrosanct principles to me.

During that discussion the separation between research and practice was complete for me. I left the weekend session with the belief that I was a practitioner as opposed to a researcher. I would complete my course work and finish the program but I would find a way to do it that supported my interest and commitment to practice. Research could be left up to someone else. I had come to this place because, for me, child and youth care was first and foremost about practice. I still felt that somehow research could benefit and improve my practice but I was not willing to sacrifice important principles in that practice in order to accommodate research.

During a telephone conversation with a friend a couple of weeks later I shared my observations. In response to a question about how the program was going, I explained to him that I had come to the realization that I was a not a researcher. I explained my passion for practice and how research did not seem to be compatible with that. He asked me if I had considered action

research. He had just completed a masters program in education and explained that action research was an approach that was gaining increasing recognition in that field. He explained that it was a form of practitioner research and that I might like to check it out. This thesis represents what I have discovered.

There is no shortage of calls for child and youth care practitioners to become more involved in research in child and youth care. The literature on the development and professionalization of the field argues that, as a profession, child and youth care needs to continue to develop and strengthen its knowledge base through research in child and youth care work (Kelly, 1990; Pence, 1990). Fewster (1990a), through his main character 'Paul,' suggests that more of this work needs to be done by child and youth care workers themselves. And, yet, despite the argument that there are many similarities between research and the practice of child and youth care (Baker and Baizerman, 1982; Pence, 1990), the gulf between research and practice persists. For many, practice is the domain of child and youth care workers while research is the domain of academics and professional researchers.

Child and youth care practice, by its very nature, requires that we become actively involved in situations, relationships and processes that we do not control. Children, youth and families remain central in our work. Research on the other hand, requires that we engage in a process that is directed by a question and methodology that we bring to a situation. We do not become actively involved in the situation we are researching for fear of

distorting the process and contaminating the 'data.' In 'research,' the methodology remains central. So, while both researchers and practitioners may utilize, as Pence (1990) suggests, the steps of "observation, theoretical interpretation, planning, implementation, evaluation and communication" (p.238) in doing their work, the two remain separate beasts and working towards reconciling the two remains a daunting proposition.

Or is it? Kelly (1990) contends that "we cannot cling to traditional methodologies and research designs" (p.171) and that we need to develop research approaches that are appropriate for child and youth care. Presumably, such approaches would need to be compatible with the work of child and youth care in practice while at the same time meeting the requirements to be considered 'research.' Literature in the field suggests that qualitative research is particularly suited for child and youth care (Garfat, 1995; Krueger, 1997; Kelly, 1990). Eisikovits (1997) has argued for an incorporation of anthropological methods in child and youth care research and practice. Nakkula and Ravitch (1998) have provided a hermeneutic framework that they feel provides an "ideal way of being an applied developmentalist" (p.34). Anglin (2002) has demonstrated the effectiveness of a grounded theory approach in deepening our understanding of residential child and youth care work.

It is my contention that action research provides another such approach. Action research is a process of inquiry that shares many of the same principles and values that are found within the child and youth care field

and, as such, presents one way that child and youth care workers can begin to incorporate research into their day to day practice. This, in itself, is not a new observation. Child and youth care researchers have noted it before when using the action research approach (Penuel and Freeman, 1997; Ricks, 1997).

To my knowledge, what has not been done before is an explicit exploration of the convergences between child and youth care and action research. This thesis, through a representative exploration of child and youth care practice and action research methodologies begins to look more closely at just what convergences exist and how action research might be used within practice. Such a convergence of principles is important because, at its core, child and youth care is about the children, youth and families that we serve. They remain central to child and youth care practice and any attempt to incorporate research into practice needs to be able to accommodate this. As my experience above demonstrates, child and youth care practitioners are not likely to engage in research if it means sacrificing the values, beliefs and principles that define their practice. Our commitment is first to the children, youth and families that we serve.

As I have discovered, however, this does not mean that research into practice is not possible. Action research has offered a way to bridge the gap between research and practice. By providing a flexible, participatory and dynamic approach to research, action research holds the potential for contributing to child and youth care practice. It is my contention that both

child and youth care practice and action research methodologies are grounded in context, founded in action, realized in relationship and focused on supporting the learning, growth and development of others. Through the compatibilities of these shared features, action research provides child and youth care practitioners with a way of reconceptualizing research so that it can become a part of their practice.

The first section of this thesis explores the nature of child and youth care practice. This first chapter of this section explores the context of child and youth care practice and some of its historical foundations. The following chapter explores some of the theoretical foundations and beliefs central to child and youth care practice and the final chapter explores some of the ways in which child and youth care practice is conducted. Together these chapters lay a foundation for understanding child and youth care that is important as we explore the possibilities that action research holds for that practice.

The second section explores action research. Action research refers to a rather broad and diverse set of participatory approaches in research that are also concerned with effecting positive change in the situations in which they are engaged. The first chapter explores some of the diverse foundations of action research located in the historical roots of contemporary action research approaches. The second chapter explores some of the common themes in different action research approaches and explores the theoretical foundations that characterize this approach to research. This section does not aim at being definitive of all action research approaches but rather seeks to

begin to provide the reader with an understanding of some of the ideas, common themes and approaches that are apparent in some of the dominant approaches to action research in the literature.

The final section of this thesis seeks to bring the first two sections together. It explores the convergences between action research and child and youth care and it provides some thoughts on how research can be incorporated into child and youth care practice. It is important to note that I am not arguing that action research is the single most appropriate approach for accomplishing this goal. Rather this section represents some of my thoughts on how action research may offer child and youth care practitioners one approach that is compatible with their practice situations. Certainly there are times where other approaches may be better suited for practitioners' needs depending on the contexts they find themselves in and the questions they wish to ask. Exploring these options, however, is beyond the scope of this work and consequently they have not been included.

The final chapter of this thesis contains some of my reflections on the journey I have undertaken. It explores some of the ways that action research has been recognized previously in the field and it explores some of the implications and limitations of the work that I have done here. This work is but a beginning. Much work remains to be done if action research is going to become accessible and valued by practitioners in the field. In my own work I am only beginning to understand how I might operationalize some of the

ideas I have presented here. However, that is the nature of learning and it is to what I have learned that I shall now turn.

## **Section One: The Nature of Child and Youth Care Practice**

This section will explore the nature of child and youth care practice by examining the contexts of the work, its theoretical frameworks and some central elements of its practice. What follows is not intended to be a definitive rendering of these topics as such is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, it is hoped that what follows will be representative and will provide the reader with an understanding of the nature of child and youth care practice.

The focus on 'practice' is intentional. The Oxford English Dictionary (1989) defines practice as a "method of working; the active practical aspect as considered in contrast to or as the realization of the theoretical aspect; [and/or] the carrying on or exercise of a profession or occupation." It is in these ways that I refer to 'practice.' I am interested in how child and youth care is understood and realized by child and youth care workers in the field as I begin to explore how child and youth care as a profession might more consistently begin to incorporate research into practice.

Child and youth care, as a discipline unto itself, is a relatively new phenomenon. As Krueger (1991a) states, "child and youth care was not well understood or developed in North America until the middle of the century when a few pioneers began studying and writing about it" (p.77). Yet the work of what is now understood as "child and youth care" has been performed in one way or another for a much longer period of time. It is from this work

that the field has been developed and it is from the recognition of the challenge, complexity and importance of this work that this field has grown. At its core, the profession of child and youth care is about its practice. As the field has grown we have begun to see differentiation within the field itself and the emergence of academics, researchers, administrators, and other supportive roles. Yet, regardless of their role or job title, we are referring to quite specific characteristics when we refer to an individual as a child and youth care professional as opposed to a social work, teaching, mental health or other professional.

The centrality of 'practice' to the field of child and youth care cannot be over-emphasized. It will become clear in the following chapters just how central 'practice' is. Furthermore, it will also become clear how important it is that as the field grows and develops that we do not separate the functions of practice from the research, development and professionalization of the field.

## ***Chapter Two***

### ***The Child and Youth Care Context***

While child and youth care as a field has emerged into its own over the past 50 or so years, the work of child and youth care has been around for centuries. As early as the seventeenth century we see the development of community responses to support the needy and underprivileged in society. Organized under the auspices of religious groups, these responses were primarily concerned with the giving of spiritual 'alms' as a way of strengthening and deepening their faiths. As Tuggener (1985) points out, these organizations were "among the first organized precursors of social-pedagogical [child and youth care] work" (p.9). It is from these beginnings we see the gradual development of a societal response of providing for, educating and responding to the needs of the less fortunate in our midst.

While certainly many differences exist among different countries and continents in how these developments unfold (Courtioux, Davis Jones, Kalcher, Steinhauser, Tuggener and Waaldijk, 1985; Gottesmann, 1991; Stein, 1995), there are several key developments in both Europe and North America which lay the ground work for the emergence of child and youth care as a discipline unto itself. Pence (1987) argues that a series of sociocultural developments in both the way in which society was organized and in the way

in which children, as members of society were understood, are the grounds from which child and youth care has emerged. He suggests that:

the origin of child care work in North America lies not in the establishment of specific care giving institutions but rather in the sociocultural conceptualization of children and youth as requiring specific forms of care by adults. (p.152)

Pence (1987) demonstrates that as North America began to industrialize, society changed from a largely rural, domestically based socio-economic system to an urban, industrial system. With this change, the structure of the family and our understanding of childhood changed. Tuggener (1985) notes the importance of a shift towards seeing childhood, or at least the education and development of children, as separate from adults as significant to the field. He points out that we first see these ideas developing in seventeenth century France with Rousseau and a growing development of these ideas with people like Pestalozzi.

It is also during this time that we begin to see some regional differences in how cultures are responding to children. In European countries, we see the emergence of 'teachers for the poor' (Tuggener, 1985). These teachers were largely recruited from the ranks of primary teachers and were seen as "careworker, farmer, and administrator all 'rolled into one'" (ibid., p.15). Institutions that developed for needy children were seen as educational and responsible for not only the care and protection of children but also for their education and development. In North America, Pence

(1987) notes, the institutions for children “evolved largely from a base of alms houses for the poor” (p. 154). Bertolino and Thompson (1999) note that:

Prior to 1800, there were only six institutions in the United States catering to children. Throughout the nineteenth century, almshouses, penitentiaries, juvenile reformatories and mental and orphan asylums appeared at an accelerating rate. The dominant theme during the nineteenth century was rehabilitation through isolation, obedience, routine and discipline along with moral and religious training. (p. xvi)

These differences remain evident in both how child and youth care work is organized on both sides of the Atlantic as well as how workers have been trained, understood and viewed in society (Barnes and Bourdon, 1990; Courtioux et al., 1986; Gottesmann, 1991).

However, as we move into the twentieth century, we begin to see the further development of society’s response to children throughout the industrialized world. Both Pence (1987) and Tuggener (1985) note that with increasing industrialization we begin to see legislation throughout Europe and North America designed to protect children from neglect and abuse. Furthermore, they suggest, we see an increasing specialization of the workforce and we begin to see a shift from private funding to public funding for various children’s institutions. With specialization we also begin to see a separation of roles and responsibilities within child-serving institutions and “the adoption of theories drawn from the social sciences” (Tuggener, p.19). From this we see the emergence of experts such as psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, therapists and administrators so that by the

1950's there remains a space for the emergence of the modern child and youth care professional.

This space was occupied by the careworkers in residential institutions who were responsible for meeting the day-to-day needs of the children in their care. Certainly other factors were involved. Tuggener (1985) notes that in Europe after the Second World War there was an increased need for institutions to care for displaced and orphaned children. Correspondingly, there was a shortage of teachers from which staff for such facilities were historically drawn. He notes that, consequently, we increasingly saw teachers duties in these institutions further refined and the emergence of a class of workers whose responsibility was to provide the daily care to these children. Such workers were specifically trained for their duties and around this time we also began to see the emergence of specialized training programs and the beginnings of what is now known as the child and youth care profession.

Today, child and youth care work has expanded its scope and we find child and youth care workers with a wide number of job titles and duties (Ferguson, Pence and Denholm, 1993). Yet, as many have observed (Davies Jones, 1985; Krueger, 1991a), child and youth care's roots remain firmly planted within residential care work. Davies Jones states that "social pedagogues were first and foremost residential child care workers and subsequent changes have not seriously disturbed this initial loyalty" (p.75). Furthermore, he states that despite "national differences due to distinctive history, ideology and culture it is not difficult to identify this group of

professional workers who help other people by sharing substantially in their daily living” (p.74). It is this feature of ‘sharing substantially’ in children and youth’s ‘daily living’ that has come to characterize the child and youth care profession. Anglin (1999) suggests that such sharing is a distinctive feature of child and youth care work and, as we shall see, it is this feature that forms the basis of much of the literature describing the field.

Early discussions and descriptions of child and youth care work began to appear during the 1950’s and 1960’s in North America. Krueger (1991b) notes that several significant books appeared during this time that advocated for the development and use of the therapeutic milieu. Trieschman, Whittaker and Brendtro’s (1969) *The Other 23 Hours* has become one of the best known books on this subject in the child and youth care field. They suggested the “the child-care worker is the most important figure to the child in the institution” (p.xiii) and they presented a framework that demonstrated how important the day-to-day work with children performed by care workers was to the care, development and treatment of children.

Today these ideas remain foundational and appear, in one form or another, within virtually all discussions about and descriptions of the child and youth care field. In his article titled *Genuine Child Care Practice Across the North American Continent*, Maier (1995) states:

Genuine carework entails the utilization of everyday happenings, creating joint interpersonal experiences for care recipients and their workers. The quality of these joint experiences is what distinguishes care work from other allied therapeutic approaches. (p.11)

From a review of the literature and personal experience in the field, Krueger (1991a) identifies a number of central themes in child and youth care work including the themes of “meeting them where they’re at,” “interacting together” and “counselling on the go” in reference to the child and youth care workers role supporting children and youth within their life space.

Anglin (1999) argues that there are five characteristics that distinguish child and youth care workers. He suggests that:

- a) Child and youth care is primarily focused on the *growth and development of children and youth*.
- b) Child and youth care is concerned with the *totality of a child’s functioning*.
- c) Child and youth care has developed a *social competence perspective* rather than a pathology-based orientation to child development.
- d) Child and youth care is based on (but not restricted to) *direct, day to day work with children and youth in their environment*.
- e) Child and youth care involves the *development of therapeutic relationships*—with children, their families, and other informal and formal helpers. (Emphasis in original, p. 145)

As these five characteristics demonstrate, child and youth care is strongly grounded by its historical roots in the daily care of children and youth. As Anglin notes, unlike teachers, psychologists, physicians and other professions who are concerned with one facet of a child’s development, child and youth care workers are interested in and involved with a child’s development from a holistic perspective. Child and youth care professionals are involved with children, youth and their families across settings and throughout their life space. Unlike other professionals who the child and their family typically see in the professional’s office (e.g. physician) or workspace (e.g. teacher), child

and youth care workers meet children, youth and their families where they are at (Krueger, 1991a) and are found alongside children, youth and their families in their homes, community and daily activities.

These distinctions about child and youth care are significant. Child and youth care takes, as central to its existence as a discipline, a close and active relationship between the profession and those that it serves. It is a profession that requires that its practitioners remain child, youth and family centered and guided by the needs and requirements of the children, youth and families with whom they are involved. This is reflected in the current description of the field that has been accepted widely internationally.

The most recent and thorough description of the field is included in Mattingly, Stuart and VanderVen (2001) and, despite its length, is worth quoting in full. Their definition states that:

Professional Child and Youth Care Practice focuses on infants, children and adolescents, including those with special needs, within the context of the family, the community and the life span. The developmental-ecological perspective emphasizes the interaction between persons and their physical and social environments, including cultural and political settings.

Professional practitioners promote the optimal development of children, youth and their families in a variety of settings, such as early care and education, community-based child and youth development programs, parent education and family support, school-based programs, community mental health, group homes, residential centers, day and residential treatment, early intervention, home-based care and treatment, psychiatric centers, rehabilitation programs, paediatric health care and juvenile justice programs.

Child and youth care practice includes assessing client and program needs, designing and implementing programs and planned environments, integrating developmental, preventative and therapeutic requirements into the life space, contributing to the development of knowledge and practice and participating in systems interventions through direct care, supervision, administration, research, consultation and advocacy. (p. 22)

As this description demonstrates, child and youth care remains focused on promoting the 'optimal development of children, youth and their families' within the context of their daily lives. The field has expanded beyond its traditional place within residential institutions and we now find child and youth care professionals working alongside children, youth and their families in a variety of home, community and institutional settings. Yet despite the differences in the many specific jobs or job titles that child and youth care workers hold --Anglin (2002a) notes that there are around "70 labels by which child and youth care workers are known"(p.29)-- the field has developed a distinct identity, along with a distinct theoretical foundation, knowledge base, and core practice concepts that come together to form a coherent profession.

## **Chapter Three**

### ***Theoretical Foundations in Child and Youth Care Practice***

It is well established in the child and youth care literature that the field embraces a 'developmental' perspective in its work. Both the description of the field presented by Mattingly et al. (2001) and their proposed competencies clearly emphasize a 'developmental-ecological' perspective for the field and require child and youth care practitioners to achieve competencies in "applied human development' and 'developmental practice methods.' Yet, when we use the terms 'development' and 'developmental' it is not always clear what we are referring to. There is a wide and increasingly complex body of knowledge to which these terms are applied, each of which stress different factors to different degrees. This chapter seeks to explore what the child and youth care field means when it talks about taking a developmental/ecological perspective and how this perspective is reflected in the values, beliefs and assumptions that child and youth care holds central to its practice.

#### ***Developmental Theory***

In psychology, developmentalists are interested in how people grow and change throughout their life spans (Meyers, 1995). Crain (2000) suggests that:

The developmentalists—theorists such as Rousseau, Montessori, Gesell, Werner and Piaget—do not agree on every point, and they

have studied different aspects of development. Nevertheless they share a fundamental orientation, which includes this interest in inner growth and spontaneous learning. (p. xii)

Furthermore he suggests that developmentalists “want to show that, at bottom, we all have the same yearnings, hopes and fears, as well as the same creative urges toward health and personal integration”(p.373).

Many developmental theorists present a series of stages that they suggest we progress through as we develop. Theorists such as Freud, Erikson, Piaget, and Kohlberg all present a sequence of stages that they suggest are universal in human development (Crain, 2000). Each of these theorists emphasizes different factors in their stages and each offers a different perspective on development from the other. Other developmentalists such as Gesell, Montessori, and Werner see development happening sequentially as individuals master increasingly differentiated and complex tasks (ibid.). However, each theorist does suggest that as development progresses it does so through a series of identifiable sequences or stages that are governed to some extent by essential biological forces.

To leave our discussion here, though, would not be appropriate. Although many developmentalists agree that biological determinants impact human development to a greater or lesser degree, they also stress the importance of environmental factors and the nature of our interaction with them. It would not be fair or correct to suggest that theorists such as Piaget or Kohlberg believe that development was simply an unfolding of potential regardless of the circumstances of that person’s life. As Crain (2000) notes,

while Piaget maintained that children moved through his identified stages in an 'invariant sequence' and discussed the existence of certain biological tendencies, Piaget saw development as an "active construction process in which children, through their own activities, build increasingly differentiated and comprehensive cognitive structures" (Crain, p.114) through which they make sense of, understand and interact with their worlds.

### ***Ecological Theory of Development***

Psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner has been extremely influential in expanding our understanding of human development. Bronfenbrenner (1979) argued that the traditional focus of developmental psychology on individual characteristics of growth and change failed to take into account the effects of the interpersonal and contextual factors that impact human development. He states that "it can be said that much of developmental psychology, as it now exists, is *the science of the strange behaviour of children in strange situations with strange adults for the briefest possible periods of time*" (emphasis in original. p. 19). This statement reflects his observation that much of the study of development has occurred in laboratory settings examining the behaviour of children with unfamiliar adults. Such studies, he contends, focus on behaviour without exploring the effects of the contexts in which it occurs. Bronfenbrenner suggests this is problematic because such study does not explore the natural conditions under which human development occurs and it

ignores the impact that interpersonal and contextual factors have in shaping, influencing and directing such development.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) states that his work is:

. . . motivated by my conviction that further advance in the scientific understanding of basic intrapsychic and interpersonal processes of human development require their investigation in the actual environments, both immediate and remote, in which human beings live.  
(p.12)

To do this he advances a framework for understanding and examining the influences of the environment on human development. Understanding development, he suggests, requires that we consider how a person both understands and acts within their immediate settings as well as how a person understands and responds to the forces that interact, influence and give shape to those settings. For Bronfenbrenner, human development is characterized by a reciprocal interaction between an individual and their ecological environments where both the individual and the contexts within which they find themselves exert a mutually accommodating influence. Development, from this perspective represents a “convergence among the disciplines of the biological, psychological and social sciences as they bear on the evolution of the individual in society” (Bronfenbrenner, p.13).

There are a number of important assumptions that provide the foundation for Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) work. First, he asserts that in seeking to understand the effects of the environment on development, what matters is how an individual perceives the environment rather than how it may exist in

'objective' reality. Bronfenbrenner suggests that how we understand and interpret our experience in our life spaces has a significant impact on how we then interact within them. He says that he is interested in what is "perceived, desired, feared, thought about or acquired as knowledge, and how the nature of this psychological material changes as a function of a person's exposure to and interaction with the environment" (p.9). This represents a significant departure from the focus on traditional psychological processes in understanding development and instead begins to look at how one's perceptions are both influenced by, and influencing of, one's interactions within that environment.

Secondly, Bronfenbrenner (1979) asserts that the environments must be understood in 'systems' terms. He suggests that within any given setting there are a multitude of influences upon an environment that cannot be effectively understood without exploring how they operate together. Within his model, Bronfenbrenner states that, "environments are not distinguished by reference to linear variables" (p. 5) but rather are understood as "a set of nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls" (p.3). He identifies four systems which together create the ecological environment of human development. Each system interacts with and is shaped and constrained by, the other systems so that together they provide a view of the context in which individuals develop and exist.

The first system is called the 'microsystem.' This system consists of the "activities, roles and interpersonal relations experienced by and individual

within a given setting.” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.22) This is one’s immediate setting consisting of the developing person and other individuals within a specific physical and material space. Each setting such as home, school, community (church, scouts/guides, soccer, dance etc.) exists as a microsystem to which an individual belongs.

The second system is called the ‘mesosystem.’ This system consists of “the interrelations between two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.25). This system, then, consists of the connections and interactions between the various microsystems of which we are a part. It is a “system of microsystems” (p.25) which by virtue of their connections and interactions give shape to and are influenced by the various microsystems in which an individual participates. ‘School’ and ‘home,’ for example, are distinctly different environments (microsystems) that elicit distinctly different behaviours and interactions yet each has an influence on the other as parents interact with teachers (mesosystem) about a child and expectations (homework) flow from one setting to another.

The third setting is called the ‘exosystem.’ This system consists of the settings that do not directly involve the developing person but “in which events occur that affect, or are affected by, what happens in the setting containing the developing person” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.25). This is the system that contains other settings such as a parent’s workplace, the local school board, a sibling’s class, or a schoolmate’s family. Each of these

settings has an influence on individuals within a developing person's microsystem which in turn has an impact on the developing person and their 'activities, roles and interrelations' yet none of these settings directly contains the developing person themselves. This is a significant step because it requires us to look beyond the immediate setting within which an individual resides as we seek to understand the developmental process. It expands our notion of 'context' in ways which, Bronfenbrenner demonstrates, have rarely been considered previously in the study of human development.

Finally the fourth system is called the 'macrosystem.' This system: refers to the consistencies, in the form and content of lower order systems (micro-, meso-, and exo-) that exist, or could exist, at the level of the subculture or the culture as a whole, along with any belief systems or ideology underlying such consistencies. (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.26)

This system recognizes the influence of larger social, cultural, historical and ideological forces on the shape and content of the other ecological systems influencing an individual. It recognizes that differences exist between different places and times that give shape to the contexts within which we live and function. A person's home, school, workplace and community contexts will be different depending on where they live, who they consist of, and the beliefs that give shape to them. These forces have an impact on how an individual understands their life space and how they interact, relate and behave within that space. Correspondingly, Bronfenbrenner suggests,

human development is shaped by and gives shape to, these forces as they interact together.

Together, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) four systems greatly expand our understandings of the 'context' of development and require us to take into consideration the effects of a wide range of factors on human development. For Bronfenbrenner, "Development is defined as the person's evolving conception of the ecological environment, and his relation to it as well as the person's growing capacity to discover, sustain or alter its properties" (p.12).

.Furthermore, he asserts:

development implies enduring changes that carry over to other places at other times. In the absence of evidence for such carry-over, the observed alternative is behaviour may reflect only a short lived adaptation to the immediate situation. (p.14)

This perspective is significant to child and youth care because it both opens up our understanding of the 'context' of development and requires us to be sensitive to the individual features of a child, youth or family's particular environmental ecology. It also requires us to recognize that developmental change is something that persists beyond a simple adaptation to our carefully planned and executed milieu.

### ***Child and Youth Care's Developmental-Ecological Perspective***

Together, all of the above gives shape to the roles, functions and existence of child and youth care professionals and their work. Mattingly et al. (2001) present what they describe as the 'foundational attitudes' of child

and youth care practice. They suggest that these attitudes “underlie all professional work” (p.7) and are, therefore, inherent in child and youth care practice. Reflected in these attitudes are the field’s concern for the “well-being of children, youth and families,” its value of “care as essential for emotional growth” and development, its belief “in the potential and empowerment of children, youth, family and community” and its acceptance of “the moral and ethical responsibility inherent in practice” (p.7). Packed in to these attitudes are a wide range of specific theoretical beliefs and assumptions about both how children develop and how we as child and youth care workers can best support that development.

Henry Maier (1979; 1991a; 1992; 1993; 1995) has probably best described and articulated what the child and youth care field means when it talks about a developmental approach to its work. His ideas are reflected in Mattingly et al.’s (2001) foundational attitudes and more specifically outline just how these are reflected in practice. Maier (1993) suggests that the developmental perspective for child and youth care work that he describes is “decisively different from the child and youth care field’s previous alignments with psychodynamic, behavioural, or cognitive stances” (p.57). By accepting that ‘human development is known as orderly and predictable’ (p.58) and suggesting that it is a “universal process” he argues that development follows a course that is inherent to all humans. However, he also states that while development “occurs over time, few changes emerge simply as the result of the passage of time” and argues that development (or lack thereof) occurs in

“the reciprocal interactions between an individual and his or her active context” (p.68). Such a position reflects the beliefs of child and youth care pioneers in the importance and significance of the child and youth care worker’s role in organizing the residential milieu and responding intentionally to the children in their care (Trieschman et al., 1969) while at the same time opening up the field’s understanding and interpretation of children’s development beyond groundings in psycho-analytic and ego-psychology ideas.

### *The Importance of Attachment*

With such an opening up comes the adoption of newer ideas and concepts in human development. Attachment theory is one such area that has generated significant interest and now appears regularly within the child and youth care literature. Maier (1993; 1994) gives it a central place in his work and its influences appear regularly in the child and youth care literature (Austin and Halpin, 1989; Berlin, 1997; Durkin, 2002; Fahlberg, 1990; Moore, Moretti and Holland, 1998).

Moore et al. (1998) note that John Bowlby first conceptualized attachment as a fundamental human need. Bowlby’s landmark work on attachment and the work of his colleague, Mary Ainsworth, highlighted the importance and influence of early attachment experiences on human development across the life span (Crain, 2000). Bowlby’s (1997) thesis was that attachment and attachment behaviours served a fundamental role in the

survival and propagation of the human species. Attachment and attachment behaviours are instrumental in creating a primary emotional bond between a child and a caregiver that ensures that the dependent infant's needs for food, warmth, security and care are met. Furthermore, attachment theory suggests that it is the quality and the nature of the bond that develops that has a significant impact on how a child understands, experiences and subsequently interacts with their world (Bowlby, 1997).

Durkin (1988) notes that basic trust is “ a crucial early building block for a satisfying life” and that “without the experience of an early positive relationship, trusting becomes progressively more difficult” (p. 171). Moore et al. (1998) argue that:

. . . from the point of conception, through birth and life-span development, individuals develop an attachment style and history. This cumulative history of the attachment process creates an ‘internal working model,’ a collection of feelings, beliefs and strategies about people and relationships that is continuously tested and modified.  
(p. 8-9)

It is through our attachment experiences that we develop a view of our worlds as a supportive and nurturing or unpredictable and hostile. Furthermore, it is from these experiences and views of the world that we react and respond to the people, situations and environments that we subsequently encounter.

As a field concerned with promoting “the well being of children, youth and families” and one that “believes in the potential and empowerment of children youth, family and community” (Mattingly et al., 2001) it is not

surprising that attachment theory has become important in our work.

Attachment theory gives shape to and confirms the field's recognition of the importance of care and relationships in human development. Maier (1994) states that "individuals with limited or defused attachment development can be assisted to a fuller attachment formation when they have a renewed chance to experience nurturing, reciprocal relationships" (p. 48). He argues that it is through availability, dependability and interaction that a child and youth care worker is able to support and assist a child in their development. As the strength of the relationship between the child and youth care worker and a child grows so does a child's ability use that relationship as a secure base from which to develop more autonomous and self-reliant capacities (Crain, 2000; Fahlberg 1990; Maier, 1994).

Much has been said in the literature about the importance of relationships in child and youth care (Fewster, 1990a,1990b; Garfat, 1995; Krueger, 1994). It my intention to explore this literature a bit further in the next chapter so I will not elaborate any further here. However, as we proceed, it is important to recognize that how we understand, promote and value these relationships is grounded in the field's developmental traditions and understandings of attachment. Equally, so, our notions of "care' that are so central to our work are shaped and influenced by these understandings.

### *Care*

As noted above, attachment theory posits that the presence or absence of reliable and dependable care can have a profound impact on human development (Bowlby, 1997; James, 1996). Just what we mean by 'care' and how it manifests itself in our work has been given significant attention within the literature (Austin and Halpin, 1987; 1989; Davis-Jones 1985; Dolan, P., 1990; Durkin, 2002; Halverston, 1995; Krueger, 1991a; Krueger and Powell, 1990; Maier, 1979; 1991b; Maier et al., 1995; Ricks, 1992). The literature describes 'care' and the 'caring relationship' as the 'epicentre' of child and youth care work (Austin and Halpin, 1987).

Ricks (1992) presents a model for caring based on feminist principles and proposes that the presence of three critical factors—a condition of need, an attitude of concern and an intentional involvement in interaction—between both the care-giver and care-receiver is what distinguishes the caring profession from other caring relationships. She further posits "it is the interactive nature of these factors which account for the development and enhancement of the caring relationship within the caring professions" (p. 53). This is also stressed in Maier et al.'s (1995) curriculum for care practice in child and youth care. They emphasize an 'interactional' and 'interpersonal' perspective throughout their document and stress that "human life experiences and development emerge from reciprocal interpersonal interactions" (p. 371).

Such a perspective takes the notion of 'care' and 'caring' beyond the one-dimensional act of providing the basics of food, shelter and clothing. 'Care' within child and youth care refers to a process of interaction with, and involvement in, the lives and life spaces of the children, youth and families that child and youth care professionals work with. "Caring" according to Austin and Halpin (1987) is about engaging in actions that "include commitment, love, constancy, patience, authenticity, absence of judgement and a shared life" (p. 37). Maier (1979) identifies seven components of care that woven together constitute the 'core of care interactions.' He suggests that care entails ensuring 'bodily comfort, differentiation, rhythmic interactions, predictability, dependability, personalized responses and care for the care giver.' 'Care' in child and youth care is "about being there, thinking on your feet and growing with children" (Krueger, 1991a, p. 77). It is not a one-way transaction but rather it is about developing connections and relationships together in a way that promotes opportunities for learning, growth and change (Maier, 1991b; Halverson, 1995).

### *Promoting Competency*

As central as 'attachment,' 'relationships' and 'care' are to child and youth care's developmental perspective, however, they are not the whole story. Increasingly we are seeing calls within the literature for child and youth care to adopt a 'competency based' approach in supporting human development. This is a call to move away from other approaches that are

'deficit-based' and which tend to 'pathologize' children's problems (Bertolino and Thompson, 1999; Durkin, 1998; Durrant, 1993; Maier, 1993). These ideas are not new and Durkin (1988) points out that the concepts were evident in Bettelheim's and Redl's work as early as the 1950's where they advocated "treating illness (inadequate ego-functioning) by promoting health (being ego-supportive)." (p. 173). However, as Bertolino and Thompson observe:

Since their inception, most residential treatment facilities have been guided by parameters based on deficit-based theories. That is an accepted practice and prevailing view has been that youth or family members are in some way damaged. (p.3)

So, while the ideas have appeared periodically within the field, they have not, historically, been adopted in practice.

Yet, Maier (1993) suggests that a competency-based approach is central to taking a developmental perspective. He argues that from a developmental perspective our interest shifts from an interest in what is wrong or 'deficient' to an interest in what a person is actually doing. By understanding what a child, youth or family is doing, Maier (1993) suggests, we are able to determine "their specific point of developmental status and transitions. They can consequently be 'fitted-in' and a decision can be made with some predictive clarity about what needs to happen to reinforce development" (p. 62). Durrant (1993) suggests that child and youth care work

is not about 'fixing' people but rather about finding ways to help people build upon the strengths and abilities that they already have.

Such an approach is consistent with Breunlin, Schwartz and Kune-Karrer's (1997) perspective on development. They state that "individual development can be expressed as a function of the mastery of competence in the domains of social, relational, emotional, cognitive and behavioural performance" (p. 169). From this perspective, child and youth care's interest and focus shifts from trying to identify what is wrong with an individual and then taking steps to repair them, to a perspective that seeks to support children, youth and families in building on the strengths that they already have and working together to support the development of further competencies. Such a perspective not only differentiates child and youth care from other helping professions (Anglin, 1999) that are intent on diagnosis of illness and pathology but also positions child and youth care professionals alongside children, family and youth in a supportive role. Rather than becoming 'experts' on other people's lives, child and youth care workers become supportive resources to children, youth and families as they strive to grow and change.

### *Recent Developments*

Just as advancements in developmental thought (Bowlby, 1997; Bronfenbrenner, 1979) have had a significant influence on the advancement of the field, the increasing academic interest and popularity of postmodern

ideas are influencing the field. Hoskins (1998) presents an argument for the importance of constructivism and constructivist ideas in child and youth care. She suggests that traditional psychological theories fall short in understanding the diversity of human experiences and the issues of "ethnicity class and gender." (p. 83) She states that "constructivist theory contends that multiple perspectives exist depending on the positionality of the individual" (p.86) and that "individuals are active, self-organizing individuals who define themselves in relation to others as well as symbolic systems. Developmental patterns are non-linear, chaotic, complex and thrive on diversity for their growth" (p. 90). Bertolino and Thompson (1999) and Durrant (1993) also draw on postmodern ideas in the development of their competency-based perspectives for child and youth care. They also stress the importance of multiple perspectives, collaboration, diversity, the construction of meaning, the taking of action and the storied nature of human meaning-making processes. They draw from the narrative ideas of Micheal White and solution focused ideas of Insoo Kim Berg in arguing for an approach to child and youth care that is grounded in postmodern conceptions of the importance of language and discourse in the shaping of our understandings and experience of the world. Like Hoskins (1998) they support the centrality of relationship and human interaction in the meaning making process and the significance of diversity and multiple perspectives on truth as opposed to universal and single truths.

Nakkula and Ravitch (1998) present a comprehensive approach for youth development work based on hermeneutics and phenomenology. They

argue that “every act of applied development work is an act of interpretation”(p.xi) and that as such hermeneutics offers us a way into understanding both our interactions with and our interpretations of, child and youth care work with children, youth and families. Their work is complex and beyond the scope of what I can relate here, yet what is important is that they stress the significance of comprehending how both one’s understanding of one’s world and, hence one’s interactions within it, are related to one’s interpretations of one’s connections to the world through time. They argue that the ways in which we make sense of the world are influenced by the social, historical, philosophical and political discourses in which we are situated within a particular place and time. We relate to the world through our interpretations of these discourses and are both constituted by, and constituents of, such discourses. For child and youth care this re-emphasizes the importance of Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) argument that we strive to understand the ecology of an individual’s human environment in our work and takes it further to make us aware of how our own interpretations of ourselves and others have a significant impact on the ways in which we organize our experience. They emphasize the reciprocity of experience and the influence of our interpretations of the world on our understandings of, and interactions with, others.

The importance of this work to child and youth care is slowly emerging as the field continues to grow and develop. Postmodern ideas are expanding and challenging child and youth care’s understandings of diversity,

connectedness and human experience. These ideas embrace child and youth care's recognition of the importance of interaction, relationships and context in human development and push practitioners to expand their understandings of the impacts of culture, diversity, gender, interpretation, and history on the ways in which they make sense of and interact with their worlds.

Together, what emerges is a specific view of human development. Child and youth care takes a position that argues that development occurs through the formation of caring attachment relationships that provide a supportive and secure base from which children, youth and families can venture forth and take risks as they pursue the development of further competencies in their lives. The perspective requires that child and youth care professionals maintain a fundamental belief in the ability and potential of children and families to develop and strengthen their competencies and it requires that child and youth care professionals become close, active participants within the life space's of those with whom they work. It is a perspective that insists that child and youth care workers do not adopt the role of expert in other lives but rather that they engage in mutual, reciprocal, caring and supportive relationships with children and families in a joint journey of growth and change.

The next chapter will explore some of the ways in which child and youth care seeks to achieve these goals. The influence of the field's developmental/ecological perspective will be seen in the following chapter's

exploration of child and youth care's notions of relationship, self and the child and youth care interaction.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Child and Youth Care Practice**

As the child and youth care field has grown and developed, the focus in the literature on child and youth care practice has shifted. Trieschman et al.'s (1969) early work in child and youth care focused on supporting the individual within a carefully managed specific environment (a residential center). Its focus was on the individual and the immediate context and did not give a lot of consideration to the wider systems that had influenced development to that point. However, as child and youth care expanded its role beyond residential centres, so to has its understanding and focus. Today we see increasing attention to the importance of family, community, peers, culture and society (Kreuger, 1994; Levy, 1996; Ponzetti Jr and Conger, 1993). The field has accepted Bronfenbrenner's (1979) emphasis on the importance of the interconnections and interactions between an individual and the values, beliefs, people and places that populate their environments (Beker and Feuerstein, 1990; Levy, 1996; Maier et al., 1995). Embedded in the perspective that child and youth care takes is a recognition and valuing of the uniqueness of each child, youth and family's situation (Bertolino and Thompson, 1999; Durrant, 1993; Villiotti, 1995), the significance of "family, culture and human diversity" in human development (Mattingly et al., 2001, p.7), and the importance of taking an active, personal, participatory role in the

life space of children, youth and families as we support and encourage developmental growth. (Fewster, 1990a; Garfat, 1995)

Earlier writings were more instrumental in their approach and focused on describing ways in which environments could be organized and behaviours could be managed. Today, the literature is much more relational and the focus is on the importance of the child and youth care relationship and its role in supporting children, youth and family development within the contexts of their lives. This chapter will seek to explore the ways in which child and youth care sees relationship and self as central to the child and youth care interaction. It will explore the centrality of relationship in practice, the importance of self and self-awareness in those relationships and the ways in which these are characterized within child and youth care practice.

### ***Relationship***

Kreuger (1994) argues that child and youth care interactions can be framed as “as series of moments of rhythm, presence, meaning and atmosphere” (p. 223). He suggests that the “focus is placed on *self* (worker and youth) *in action*” (emphasis in original, p. 299) and that “moments of rhythm, presence, meaning and atmosphere are an integral part of forming empowering relationships” (p.227). In child and youth care work with children, youth and families, relationships that are attuned to the rhythm of others, grounded in being present emotionally, physically and cognitively, and sensitized to the atmosphere of, and meanings in, interaction, are what

makes a difference. Bertolino and Thompson (1999) suggest “an overriding twenty-four hour a day, seven days a week, concern in residential care should be to promote the normal growth and development of children” (p. xix). To accomplish this, they argue, we must believe that change is possible and we must recognize the power of genuine, caring, supportive and respectful relationships.

Thompson (1997) notes that the central theme in child and youth care practice is the development of such relationships. However, she also notes that “these relationships, although highly valued and esteemed, are remarkably under researched and poorly conceptualized” (p.53). Felicetti (1987) discusses the resistance of these relationships to description. One only has to look as far as Brendtro’s (1998) discussion of his early attempts to describe relationships to see how such definitions can be limiting. Yet, as Felicetti observes, even though these relationships resist our attempts to define them, we have a responsibility to continue to strive to be clear about what we are talking about when we stress the importance of ‘relationship.’

Gerry Fewster has contributed significantly to this discussion in child and youth care (Fewster, 1990a; 1990b). Fewster (1990b) argues that “only through relationship, real or imagined, past or present, near or far, do we come to know our qualities, potentials, vulnerabilities and, ultimately, our humanness and our mortality” (p.25). He suggests that “personal relationships then become the most critical learning contexts through which we all must come to ‘understand’” (ibid., p.29). His position is that by

embracing the personal relationship as central to child and youth care practice, child and youth care workers must become fully invested in the process. They must develop their own sense of 'self,' and recognize the importance of fostering "a condition of self-awareness from which the individual reaches out in an attempt to grasp and understand the experience of the other" (p. 32). According to this view, child and youth care workers must develop a 'role-taking ability' so that they can understand how they are perceived by the children they are working with, they must negotiate appropriate boundaries, and they must 'keep things clear.'

Moreover, Gudgeon (1989) suggests that we must also pay attention to the language that we use to conceptualize child and youth care relationships. He argues that "behavioural and medical metaphors suggest an imbalanced relationship between child and adult" (p.18). The use of such language suggests that the child and youth care worker's role in relationship is to 'heal', 'repair', or 'train' children, youth and families. Instead, Gudgeon states, "child care must accept that intimacy and involvement are in fact okay, and that a developmental perspective is one sensitive to those dynamic relationships which allow children to reach their potential" (p.20). For Gudgeon, child and youth care is not about treatment or cures but rather is about engaging in relationships with children, youth and families that support them as they grow and develop. Such relationships are founded in caring, personal and involved daily interactions with children, youth and their families

in their immediate contexts or life space (Durkin, 2002; Krueger, 1991a; Maier, 1995).

This is reinforced by Thompson (1997). From her phenomenological study of the essence of relationships between big and little brothers and sisters, Thompson suggests that “the essence of such relationships can be summed up as a dynamic friendship actualized through mutual acceptance and sustenance that enriches the lives and fosters the personal development of both participants” (p. 59). She reinforces that such relationships are mutual, reciprocal, and dynamic interactions. This echoes my earlier discussion on ‘care’ in child and youth care practice and the importance of an engaged, and active participation in the process by both the child and youth care worker and the children, youth and families with whom they are engaged. Thompson argues that her “study reveals the legitimate needs of children and youth in care to know *who* the person they are assigned to is and *what* his or her life is about” (emphasis in original, p. 60). She suggests that child and youth care practitioners must, therefore, be able to “effectively apply who they are, how they feel and what they know about themselves to the therapeutic relationship” (p.60).

Furthermore, Mazzocchi (1999) suggests that “relationship is a constellation of action and being that combines characteristics and professional skills which may be mediated through a specific context or setting” (p.26). From this view relationships are more than simply the interactions between self and other, but also include the knowledge, skills,

and experiences that both bring to the interaction and the contexts in which those interactions occur. Her thesis also reminds us that the relationships that we develop with the children, youth and families that we work with are impacted by the relationships that we have with our colleagues, organizations and employers and by the ways in which these relationships affect how we understand, conceptualize and make sense of our roles.

This view is asserted in Maier et al.'s (1995) special report on the *Curriculum Content for Child and Youth Care Practice*. This document emphasizes an interactional and interpersonal perspective within child and youth care. It asserts that "the most effective interactions between workers and clients are based on relationships and the professional use of self, utilizing knowledge of the developmental requirements of individual clients and the dynamics of human interaction." (p. 272). It reinforces the "essence of relationships in human development" (ibid.) and sees carework as a process, as a contextual practice and as a therapeutic intervention. It also draws attention to the importance of carework as indirect practice and the role organizations, teams and colleagues have in affecting the quality of that carework.

Finally, the School of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria has adopted a knowledge, skills, and self model for the personal and professional development of child and youth care workers. It asserts that all three elements are essential in the development of effective child and youth care practice (Ellsdon, 1997). In this model, knowledge, skills and self cannot

be separated from 'performance' (practice). All three are mutually related. Knowledge about human development, attachment and the elements of care practice must be learned, skills must be developed and self-awareness must be nurtured. Effective child and youth care relationships require all three.

### ***Self-Awareness***

Understanding the constellation of knowledge, skills and self that make up child and youth care practice requires an understanding of self. Fewster (1990a) suggests this when he argues that only when we are able to open up and examine our own experiences can relationships flourish. Kass and Mann-Feder (1995) observe that by placing relationship at the center of child and youth care practice, workers often "intervene in highly emotionally charged situations using themselves as instruments of change" (p. 33). They argue that "unless we train child and youth care staff to distinguish their issues from those of their clients we risk contamination of the therapeutic process. This requires first and foremost a capacity for self-reflection" (p. 32).

Ricks (1989) argues that "in order to be self aware, child and youth care workers need a way to think about self" (p. 33). Her self-awareness model is part of the curriculum for students in the School of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria. She posits that:

Because child and youth care practitioners work with people daily, their jobs require them to know where the client is and what is happening for the client in their present context. To know about the client requires

being aware of self since the client only exists out of one's self experience of the other person. (p.35)

Her model consists of two constructs: the belief system and style. The belief system contains a person's beliefs, values and ethics. Style consists of thoughts, feelings and actions. The model contends that the positions we take are evident in our thoughts, feelings and actions. These thoughts feelings and actions are, in turn, shaped by our beliefs, values and ethics. One can begin to think about self by entering into the model at any single point and moving through the other domains to explore how our beliefs, values and ethics inform our thoughts, feelings and actions.

According to Ricks (1989) this model serves a number of purposes. It offers a way for individuals to think about self and it offers a way to "have understanding in the moment so as to be truly aware" (p. 38). It also stimulates an individual to examine the various dimensions in their presentation of self so that they can increase their awareness of those presentations. As noted above, Fewster (1990a), insists that developing effective relationships requires that we become aware of our presentations and how they are being received in our interactions.

Ricks (1989) also notes that "self-awareness insures awareness of functioning which in turn allows for intention towards functioning"(p. 34). This asserts that if the aim of our relationships is to support the growth and development of children, youth, and families (Bertolino and Thompson, 1999), then fostering our own self-awareness is a prerequisite to achieving such

intentionality. As we examine our beliefs, values and ethics in relation to our thoughts, feelings and actions we may discover that the dimensions do not correspond. We may further discover that though we are acting in good faith, the results of our actions are not in line with what we intend. Taking the time to reflect on what we are doing and how it corresponds with what we intend is a vital component of our ongoing development and practice so that 'in the moment' we are truly present, and (inter)acting in ways that are consistent with what we hope to achieve (Krueger, 1991; Fewster, 1990b).

The importance of self-awareness also extends into our ethical decision making. Peterson, Young and Tillman (1990) state that "individuals must engage in a process of identification with and personalization of the code of ethics, so that it becomes relevant, understood and expressed, rather than remaining an abstract, external list of rules and principles" (p.222). Magnuson (1995) argues that "ethical practice is driven by the self in engagement with others" (p.405). The Code of Ethics contained in Mattingly et al.'s (2001) competency document states that "this ethical statement is a living document, always a work in progress" (p. 23). For Garfat and Ricks (1995), this means that ethical practice is about more than just following a prescription of rules, it is about understanding ethical guidelines and interpreting how they may be applied in a specific context. Such interpretation involves the use of self and requires an awareness of self.

Garfat and Ricks (1995) suggest that "ethical practice and good clinical practice are both viewed as driven by the self" (p. 396). They present a self-

driven ethical decision making model for child and youth care that posits 'knowing self', 'thinking critically', 'taking personal responsibility', 'considering alternative choices', and seeking 'evaluation and feedback' as the attributes necessary for self-driven ethical practice. Ethical actions, this suggests, require that we have developed an awareness of the ways in which we make sense of the world and how these are manifested in our action. It requires us to examine our constructions critically and to take responsibility for our choices. Thinking critically and taking responsibility requires an awareness of the ways our selves are in relation with others and that such awareness is accessible to us as we make choices and (inter)act.

### ***The Child and Youth Care Intervention***

In the end, then, what does all of this mean in relation to child and youth care practice? As Felicetti (1987) discusses, when child and youth care workers begin their practice, they want to know what to do. They are interested in how it is they are expected to act. They look for prescriptions and techniques and look to experienced workers to show them what to do. Placing 'relationship' and 'self' at the center of practice does not, at first glance, tell us what practical steps one should take in a given moment.

Felicetti draws an analogy to juggling in an attempt to describe experienced child and youth care practitioner's relationships. He suggests that "in juggling there is a point where, after considerable practice and if the juggler is considerably blessed, the performer achieves such a state of

unconscious confidence, concentration and oneness with the task at hand that almost anything can be juggled” (p.60). His point is that in child and youth care, as in juggling, relationships are developed and self-awareness is achieved through the constant struggle, practice and experience with the task at hand. Relationships and self-awareness are elusive to teach because as soon as we start placing them in models or limiting them through definition we begin to lose the essence of what makes them so powerful.

Thus for Ricks (1989), self-awareness is not a ‘post hoc analysis,’ it is a state of being. Fewster (1990b) refers to relationships in the same way. Their discussions, like our code of ethics, are guidelines that child and youth care workers, through engagement, can come to know, experience and understand. Ricks’ self awareness model may at first feel like a series of mechanical steps but, when internalized, the model provides an avenue through which child and youth care workers can achieve Felicetti’s juggler’s state of ‘unconscious confidence, concentration and oneness’ or, as Ricks suggest, a state of ‘being’ self aware.

Eisikovits, Beker and Guttman (1991) argue that the same is true for their model for knowledge utilization in residential care. Their model presents a “seven step, process oriented knowledge utilization model for residential child and youth care work” (p. 10). They contend that such a model is necessary, because:

Too little effort is being invested in helping direct care workers to become knowledge utilizers, and the existence of pertinent knowledge

has relatively little to do with how most present-day child and youth care workers go about their daily tasks. (p. 5)

Their model, they acknowledge, dissects the process into its constituent parts and can be seen as mechanical and cumbersome. But, they argue, with the requisite skill and experience, the process can become “virtually unconscious with time and practice” (p.10).

I present this model here because it is a significant attempt to describe a process for the child and youth care interaction. Eisikovits et al. (1991) present it as a model which can be used to improve the quality of child and youth care practice. My use of it here is a bit of a reinterpretation because they present it as a model for increasing knowledge utilization in practice as opposed to a model of the child and youth care interaction. I feel justified in taking such a liberty, however, as it remains a description of a child and youth care process to guide daily practice and as such is one that may be also used for conceptualizing such practice.

The seven steps of Eisikovits et al. (1991) model are: 1) Experiencing an incident; 2) Grasping; 3) Identifying and weighing options for action; 4) Choosing a theory; 5) Hypothesizing from theory; 6) Confronting options for action with test hypotheses, and; 7) Acting as doing conceptual practice. They argue that as soon as we become aware of a situation we begin to attend to it. In attending we notice a change and begin to pay attention to and reflect on what we are experiencing (stage 1). As we experience an incident we begin to impute meaning on it (Stage 2) and start to decide what to do

about it (stage 3). In deciding what to do, we can access theories that relate to the situation (stage 4) as a guide to choosing what response might be most effective action for the situation (Stage 5). In any given situation there may be any number possible explanations (theories) for what is going on and any number of possible solutions (hypotheses) and we explore these options using both our experience of the situation and theory's explanations for it as a guide (Stage 6). Finally, we respond to the situation at hand and observe the outcome (stage 7). If the situation resolves itself then the process is finished; if it does not then it continues to spiral through itself until resolution is achieved.

Eisikovits et al. (1991) suggest that when we simply choose one option and act, we are doing so intuitively and are not progressing past stage 3 of their model. To engage in 'conceptual' practice—their ideal—we must access our store of abstract knowledge as opposed to just our store of implicit or intuitive knowledge. It is possible, however, to see even an intuitive choice as one based upon a theory and to use the model as a way of re-examining our responses within a situation at the various stages. Such a use offers the potential of making our implicit knowledge explicit and thus available for examination and discussion. In this way, this model becomes more than just one for knowledge utilization but becomes one also for conceptualizing how child and youth care workers act in practice.

In a different model, Garfat and Newcomen (1992) suggest that "it is not enough to understand content; one must also have a way of organizing

his or her interventions with children in a clear manner” (p. 277). Their model consists of five distinct interconnected stages that they argue are inherent in any effective child and youth care intervention. These stages are ‘assessment’, ‘selection’, ‘pause’, ‘intervention’ and ‘follow-up.’ They state that they “believe that an adequate intervention involves an assessment of the situation, the selection of an intervention from a range of options, a reflection on the process, the act of intervening and adequate follow-up” (p. 278). Each stage has three steps and emphasizes the need for constant reflection and awareness of self, other and context. It argues that in any given moment of interaction, a child and youth care worker must rely on their knowledge base, their experience, their skills and their selves as they are called upon to interact with children, youth and families. Garfat and Newcomen offer their model as a way to both conceptualize a quality child and youth care intervention and as a way to assist child and youth care workers to become more effective in their work.

Finally, Garfat (1995) conducted a phenomenological inquiry into the effective child and youth care intervention. This work is significant because it develops an understanding of the child and youth care intervention that has not been provided before. His goal was to explore what constitutes an effective child and youth care intervention by exploring three different interactions between three child and youth care workers and three youth. At the end of his study he states that an effective intervention can be seen as:

An intentional caring act, taken into one of the daily life systems of which the youth is a part, which facilitates a change in that system

such that a context is created for the youth to have a different experiencing of herself and/or the meaning she gives to her experiencing. (p. 218)

He stresses that “feedback and attending to feedback is an important part of the process of intervention” (p. 127) and that the “effective utilization of self is seen as essential for effective child and youth care practice” (p. 210).

Interactions need to be considered for how they fit for the youth and child and youth care workers need to be constantly striving to adjust their interactions according to the context, needs and uniqueness of each particular youth.

In his study, Garfat identified the elements of the process of intervention as identified by both the youth and the child and youth care worker. The elements of the process as identified by the youth and the child and youth care worker differ, yet both require that a connection is made and that a relationship is developed. What also becomes apparent in exploring both these descriptions is that while both youth and worker experience the event differently, both experience it in the context of a personal, reciprocal, moment in relationship with each other.

Garfat (1995) also identifies metathemes of effectiveness from the interactions. What make the interactions effective, Garfat contends, are:

- a caring for and commitment to youth,
- self confidence and responsibility,
- a general and immediate awareness of self,
- awareness of context,
- a way of understanding/knowing the individual youth, experiences of familiarity in the relationship,

- a way of connecting which fits for the youth,
- preparation for the intervention,
- an intervention related to the immediate,
- an intervention which responsabilizes,
- an intervention which challenges, and
- continuity in the experience of relationship. (p. 157)

These characteristics of effective child and youth care interventions capture all that has been discussed above. They reflect the developmental-ecological perspective of the field, the importance of care, attachment, relationship and self-awareness, and the significance of acting within the daily life spaces of the children, youth and families that child and youth care practitioners work with every day.

In closing this section, we must acknowledge the dynamic, fluid and particular nature of child and youth care work. It is grounded in the specific daily lives of the children, youth and families with whom we work. It is founded in practice and sustained by a concern for improving the lives of those that it serves. It rejects the notion of its practitioners as experts with an ability to 'fix' and instead embraces a vision of its role as supportive facilitators who travel and learn alongside individuals involved in a journey of growth. Child and youth care workers pay attention to contexts and find their strength in caring relationships that provide the safety from which risks can be taken and development occurs. This is not an easy path to walk but it is one which child and youth care holds dear. This is important to consider as I now

turn to explore action research and the possibilities it holds for incorporating research into child and youth care practice.

## **Section Two: Action Research**

This section will provide a perspective on the diverse group of research approaches and methodologies that are known as action research.

Contemporary action research has grown from a dissatisfaction with traditional conceptualizations of research in the social sciences and a desire to make research more accessible to ordinary people. It is an approach that has developed within a variety of contexts and consequently represents an amalgamation of a number of different approaches that share similar goals and features. There are no definitive accounts of what constitutes or qualifies as action research and there are significant disagreements among different action researchers about how action research should be conceptualized.

Furthermore, as Stringer (1999) notes, there are differing accounts of the history and genesis of action research as it is understood today. Each account reflects the author's own history and involvement in the action research tradition and each emphasizes the development of the thought that informs their particular approach to action research. However, as Stringer (1999) also notes, there are commonalities that bind these approaches together. It is these common themes that this section seeks to explore in understanding action research. What follows does not seek to be comprehensive or definitive. Rather, my goal is to provide a broad introduction to the ideas and forms of action research from a variety of contexts. From this I hope to leave readers with a sense of the common

threads that hold action research together and the diverse potentials of the various approaches to action research.

Yet, before I begin to explore some of the histories, theoretical foundations and diverse conceptualizations of action research, a brief note on terminology is in order. I have chosen to use the term 'action research' throughout this document while increasingly we are seeing the use of 'participatory action research' and other terms being used in a significant proportion of the literature. It can be argued that each refers to a distinct approach to research and that the terminology is important. While I do not wish to trivialize or dismiss these distinctions, I have chosen the term 'action research' throughout this document in an attempt to be inclusive of those approaches that share some common characteristics despite their differences. I am following Reason and Bradbury's (2001) lead in this matter. In their recent *Handbook of Action Research* they say

The action research family includes a whole range of approaches and practices each grounded in different traditions, in different philosophical and psychological assumptions, pursuing different political commitments . . . we have chosen to retain the term 'action research' as the term to describe the whole family of approaches to inquiry which are participative, grounded in experience and action-oriented because, practically speaking, it is generally recognizable and not exclusively 'owned' by one tradition (p. xxiv).

It is in the same spirit the term 'action research' is used below.

## **Chapter Five**

### ***An Introduction to Action Research***

By way of introduction, this chapter will attempt to provide *a view* of *some* of the history and shared beliefs of what is today known as action research. As Reason and Bradbury (2001) note, “we doubt it is possible to provide one coherent history of action research” (p.2). Certainly this has been my experience in attempting to gather together information and literature for this chapter. There is no single place to begin nor is there any single tradition from which action research is drawn. What follows, then, is representative of the interpretation that I have constructed and is far from complete. Despite attempts to the contrary, it is likely that there are traditions that I have missed and important contributors that I have neglected. Nevertheless, I have tried to be representative and to capture the major traditions from which the family of action research has grown.

#### ***Kurt Lewin***

Kurt Lewin is generally considered to be the founder of action research (Adelman, 1997; Greenwood and Levin, 1998; Reason and Bradbury, 2001; Stringer, 1999). Others suggest it originated in the work of John Collier, the US Commissioner of Indian Affairs from 1933-1945 (McNiff, 2002). Yet, regardless of where it initiated, the literature almost universally recognizes the influences of Lewin’s work in social psychology and intergroup

relations as seminal in the development of action research. In 1946 Lewin published an article called *Action Research and Minority Problems* (see Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988) in which he identifies action research as “a spiral of steps each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action and fact finding about the result of the action” (quoted in Kemmis and McTaggart, p.2). In the article Lewin expresses a frustration with practitioners who implement program strategies without an adequate understanding of their objectives or an adequate examination of their outcomes. He likens such approaches to a captain of a ship entering the bridge to see that the ship is off course turning the rudder and then going for supper as the ship consequently proceeds to turn in circles. Lewin felt that both researchers and practitioners needed to conduct examinations of the effects of their work within the environment in which they acted. His articulation of action research was an attempt to locate the study of social group behaviours within the contexts in which they occurred.

Lewin conducted a number of studies in which he put his ideas into action. His work on group dynamics and industrial organization demonstrated the importance of involving research subjects as part of the process. Lewin found that by involving workers in the change process within their workplaces, productivity and commitment could be improved (Greenwood and Levin, 1998). Adelman (1997) notes that “the pioneering action research of Lewin and his associates showed that through discussion, decision, action, evaluation and revision in participatory democratic research, work became

meaningful and alienation was reduced" (p. 87). Certainly Lewin's focus on action (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988), his conceptualizations of change, his interest in conducting research in real life settings and his slogans "Nothing is so practical as a good theory" and "the best way to understand something is to try and change it" (Greenwood and Levin, 1998) have been highly influential in shaping action research. Just how democratic and participatory they were, however, remains another question.

Lewin's approach certainly fell within the bounds of the conventional social science of his day (Adelman, 1997; Greenwood and Levin, 1998). Lewin was different in his interest in studying things by changing them in their natural environments but his approach was still authoritarian and aimed at producing a specific, desired effect. He was interested in deducing social laws and in the potential of action research for 'social engineering' both of which are concepts which we would not find in action research today. His approach involved subjects in the development and implementation of desired changes to the extent that such involvement had been shown to be efficient and effective (Greenwood and Levin, 1998). Yet as researcher Lewin still maintained a detached 'expert' role and retained an authoritarian control over the collection and interpretation of the data.

Lewin went on to found the centre for Group Dynamics in the United States and his ideas were particularly influential in subsequent work in business, management and leadership. We see the influence of his ideas in work such as Peter Senge's (1990) *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice*

*of the Learning Organization* where, although they are not directly referenced, Lewin's concepts are certainly present. However, Lewin's ideas about action research never really caught on in the United States following his death and but for a few exceptions (see Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988) the idea of action research was dismissed by mainstream researchers until its resurgence in the 1970's (Adelman, 1997). So, for the further development of Lewin's notion of action research one needs to turn to Britain and the Tavistock Institute.

### ***The Tavistock Institute***

Rapoport (1970) discusses how the Tavistock Institute was created by a diverse group of scientists following the second world war. He states that:

The Tavistock stream of experience brought together psychologists and social anthropologists with psychiatrists of a psychoanalytic orientation. During and immediately after the war they conducted a number of successful experimental action programmes. (p. 89)

Adelman (1997) notes that Lewin enjoyed a close relationship with the members of the Tavistock Institute and that the institute was headed up by one of Lewin's post-doctoral students when Lewin had to decline an invitation from Eric Trist to head up the institute. In its post war work, the institute, among other things, continued to develop and implement Lewin's notion of action research within a number of industrial settings. Greenwood and Levin (1998) note that the Tavistock's early work with British coal mines and later with setting up the Norwegian Industrial Democracy Project were particularly

significant. They suggest that this, combined with other earlier projects that resulted from the institute's commitment to Lewin's concept of conducting direct experiments in work life, demonstrated the effectiveness and value of action research. Greenwood and Levin's own work with action research in industrial and organizational development is seen as flowing directly from this work.

Greenwood and Levin (1998) also note that while action research in this tradition was significant in its development of ideas around the organization of work and the importance of participation by workers in research and implementation, researchers continued to take an 'expert' role. The research itself was not collaborative and researchers conducted their analysis, made their recommendations for change, and then implemented processes that involved the workers who were affected by those changes. They note that while the Norwegian Industrial Democracy Project had a significant democratic and idealistic dimension, much of this was lost in subsequent re-interpretations and departures from action research as industry focused on the improvements to efficiencies achieved in the project.

However, with Rapoport's (1970) article we see, within Tavistock and the action research community, a growing awareness and concern with this situation. Rapoport acknowledges that there had been problems and challenges with the way in which action research had been conducted in previous years. Specifically Rapoport notes a growing differentiation between the research task and the implementation of the findings. Furthermore he

identifies a number of dilemmas relating to differences in ethics, goals and initiatives between researchers and their industrial clients. Rapoport's discussion is important in this context because it highlights both tensions that continue to be salient today as well as the need for action research to address issues such as its ethical stance, its goals and the relationship between the researcher and the research situation.

### ***British Educational Action Research***

Adelman (1997), Altrichter and Gstettner (1997) and Hart and Bond (1995) note a concurrent resurgence of interest in action research within other sectors. All note the development of an increased dissatisfaction with mainstream research traditions occurring in the late 1960's and early 1970's leading to an interest in the potentials of action research. In general the feeling was that traditional research paradigms had failed to provide real solutions to pressing social problems and had perpetuated the oppression and alienation of ordinary citizens through their hierarchical organization and control over knowledge production and use (Altrichter and Gstettner). Action research became an alternative to such systems.

During this time in Britain the existence of funding under the Community Development Projects and the Educational Priority Areas opened the door to using action research as a way of researching and taking action on social problems. Hart and Bond (1995) note that the central objective of these projects was to develop new forms of practice that might become social

policy through research and action. They note that community participation was built in from the start and that by “using an action research framework, this was an attempt to use research for the benefit of action, with teams of researchers providing information in the form of social surveys on which the action teams could base their work “(p.27). Adelman (1997) notes that it is through the Educational Priority Areas funding and the Humanities Curriculum Project that his and John Elliott’s seminal work on the Ford Teaching Project emerged. It is this project, in combination with Lawrence Stenhouse’s work on ‘teachers-as-researchers’ (McNiff, 2002) that is seen as significant in the emergence and development of contemporary action research both in education and the broader action research family.

This was not the first emergence of action research in educational research. Hart and Bond (1995) note that Stephen Corey wrote on the subject during the 1950’s in the United States. However, both Hart and Bond and Carr and Kemmis (1986) note that the post Sputnik proliferation of a research development and diffusion model promoted and sustained a separation between research and practice that was very prominent during this time. Consequently, while Corey’s work received some attention it was largely discredited and ignored until the 1970’s.

McNiff (2002) notes that in 1969 J.J. Schwab wrote a paper critical of the then current trends in educational research and argued for the “potential of localised practitioner research as a form of educational and social change” (p, 43). This work coincided with the work in Britain in the Humanities

Curriculum Project and the work of Lawrence Stenhouse that saw “teaching and research as closely related, and called for teachers to reflect critically and systematically about their practice as a form of curriculum theorizing” (McNiff: p. 43). This work influenced John Elliott as a member of the Humanities Curriculum project and he brought his belief in the importance of teachers as researchers in their own practice with him as he developed and ran the Ford Teaching Project with Clem Adelman (Adelman, 1997).

Carr and Kemmis (1986) note that the work of the Ford Teaching Project was significant in the resurgence of action research for a number of reasons. They suggest that there was a growing perception that research was becoming increasingly irrelevant for practitioners. Practitioners felt that current educational research did not meet their needs and they were demanding an increased role in the development and production of knowledge in education. Additionally there was an increased interest in the perspectives of participants in the education process and on their role in shaping educational practices and situations. The Ford Teaching Project responded to these issues by using action research as a way of involving and valuing the teacher’s role in examining, shaping and developing their own practice (Adelman, 1997).

Adelman (1997) discusses the process that brought him together with John Elliott for the Ford Teaching project. This account is illustrative of the struggles facing action research noted by Rapoport (1970) and is significant in showing how Adelman and Elliot addressed these concerns. Adelman

discusses how Elliot brought to the project a clearly defined and established protocol for the teachers who were to be involved in the project. Adelman asserts that he discouraged this and they opted instead to leave room for the teachers concerns and issues to lead the process. They emphasized the collaborative relationship between themselves and the teachers which saw Adelman and Elliot adopt a facilitative role rather than a directive or authoritative one. They made it the teachers' responsibility to articulate and define their own research problems related to their practice and the outside researchers responsibility to examine their own practice in facilitating the teacher's research.

Together, through their work on the Ford Teaching Project, Adelman and Elliot have been highly influential on contemporary action research. As Altichter and Gstettner (1997) and McNiff (2002) note, the Ford Teaching Project's focus on the process of research as opposed to the product of the research redefined both the role of the outside researcher and the relationship between the researcher and the research situation. It valued the practitioners' involvement in developing solutions for their own practice with a group of 'critical friends' who together had a role in collecting and analyzing data and in developing and implementing solutions from that data. This contrasts significantly from the relationship and roles of researchers and participants discussed earlier in both Lewin's and the Tavistock's work on action research and further establishes the position that contemporary action

research has taken on the ethical, goal and relationship issues raised by Rapoport (1970).

### ***German Action Research***

This work in Britain, however, was not the only place action research was generating interest during the 1970's. Altrichter and Gstettner (1997) discuss how a similar resurgence of interest was taking place within German speaking countries. They note that in these countries there was a growing student protest movement that was also critical of the dominant research paradigms of the day. Based in part on the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, these criticisms were directed at the failure of modern social science to bring the emancipation from social problems that had been hoped for following WWII. Altrichter and Gstettner state that:

Since 1945 there was hope that modern social sciences could provide new and rational instruments for the planning of democratic society but the 'scientization of everyday living' and the re-emergence of a split between academics, knowledge and everyday practice became clear by the late 60's. These were seen as contributing to alienation, oppression and isolation of everyday life. (p.50)

It was within this context that German action research developed fairly independently of other streams of action research. It emerged as a "oppositional alternative to the dominant practices of research" (Altrichter and Gstettner: p. 48). It called for the establishment of a form of research that was not dominated or legitimized by the existing structures for knowledge

production and one which was instead under the control and direction of everyday citizens.

Drawing from Lewin and including notions from the critical theory of Habermas, the German notion of action research was seen to promise the “improvement of everyday life through conscious and planned dialogue” achieved by “developing communicative competencies within a communicative climate free from domination in a direction of shared and consensual orientations for action” (Altrichter and Gstettner, 1997, p. 52). It would find its basis in the knowledge and experience of everyday living and it would seek to support individuals in identifying, understanding and freeing themselves from the domination of existing social structures and practices (ibid.).

What happened in practice, however, did not live up to this ideal. Altrichter and Gstettner (1997) discuss the results of the Marburg Primary School Project as an example of both the struggles and debates that existed within the German action research community as well as an example of why the interest in German action research faltered. The Marburg Primary School Project was a practice-oriented curriculum development project directed at the “advancement of individual competency for self-determination and social competency of critique and participation “ (Klafki, 1973, p. 495 quoted in Altrichter and Gstettner, p, 53). The project was quickly mired in controversy over its use of traditional evaluation methodologies, its division of roles between researchers and teachers and its ‘product’ or outcome

orientation. While this debate continued throughout the project, the organizers argued that the use of traditional methods was both necessary and justified within the bounds of their overall research approach and that the division of labour was necessary to make the best use of the differentiated skills that teachers and researchers brought to the situation. The project team suggested that the criticisms it faced were practically unachievable and overly idealistic and that the project could effectively draw together these seemingly incompatible issues through collaboration and cooperation (Altrichter and Gstettner).

However, as the decade progressed and further action research was done in this tradition, the problems continued to be highlighted. In retrospect, Altrichter and Gstettner (1997) note that action researchers failed to identify how their own ideological and predefined goals for the projects recreated the patterns of domination and control that they sought to avoid. Furthermore, Altrichter and Gstettner suggest action research all but disappeared as quickly as it appeared in German speaking countries because it had failed to adequately develop its methodology beyond a criticism of traditional approaches into an alternative that fully addressed these criticisms. It was not prepared for the reaction or reception that it received from the establishment nor for the problems that surfaced as it attempted to operationalize its ideas. However, as Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) note, it did have its influence and its ideas did make their way into contemporary action research circles.

### ***Action Research in the Developing World***

Beyond the German situation discussed by Altrichter and Gstettner (1997), developments were also occurring in the early 1970's within the developing world. Like their German counterparts, researchers within these countries were dissatisfied with the ability of traditional social science to address the concerns of everyday living. Unlike their German counterparts, they did not draw from action research or critical theory ideas initially and instead began working on their own models of participatory research. Orlando Fals-Borda (1997; 2001) and Bud Hall (2001) discuss the contexts and sources of this work in South America and Africa respectively. Fals-Borda (1997) describes how he resigned his university post in 1970 "with the mortifying discovery that my university, in its actual condition, could not understand adequately the ever-present theory and practice dialectics" (p. 117). Fals-Borda and his contemporaries believed that they could not effectively bring support and development to rural third world situations from within the university. They felt that the university's separation of theory and action and that the prescription's of 'science' did not adequately value the knowledge and experience of the peasant and indigenous people with whom Fals-Borda sought to work.

For Hall (2001) his experiences as a Research Officer in Tanzania from 1970-1974 influenced and shaped his conceptions of participatory research. He defines participatory research as " an integrated three pronged

process of social investigation, education and action designed to support those with less power in their organizational or community settings” (p. 171). It is a perspective born from an affinity for the late President Nyerere of Tanzania’s beliefs in the power of education to liberate people in the same way it had been used to ‘enchain’ them. It draws on Hall’s observation that he could more effectively learn about rural Tanzanians’ interests and needs by sitting down and listening to them during evenings at a community centre than he was able to by conducting more ‘scientific’ social survey research. And it makes a connection with the work in South America through Hall’s participation in a 1971 presentation given by Paulo Freire in Tanzania. In his chapter, Hall traces his connection to participatory research and emphasizes its belief in the importance and value of local knowledge and customs, in full and active participation in the entire research process by the community, and in the community’s ability to define, analyze and solve its own problems. It is an approach that places the researcher as a “committed participant and learner in the process of research” (Hall, p.173) and one that privileges the community’s and its inhabitants own knowledge over that which the researcher brings to the situation.

While I will discuss the contributions and ideas of participatory research in greater detail in later chapters it is important to note here that these participatory research traditions came together with action research to form the contemporary “participatory action research’ tradition (McTaggart, 1997). Both traditions shared in their dissatisfaction with traditional social

science methodologies' ability to provide any meaningful answers for everyday living and in their strong interest in working collaboratively in local situations to generate solutions to problems experienced by local peoples. However, what the participatory research tradition also brought were some strong beliefs and ideas about the relationship between the researcher and the research situation and the value of 'popular' knowledge (Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991) that have since become quite central within the contemporary action research literature.

### ***Australian Action Research***

Finally, one can no longer present a discussion about the history of action research without acknowledging the contributions of Australian action researchers and, in particular, the work of Stephen Kemmis and his colleagues (Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Kemmis, 2001; Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988). Carr and Kemmis articulate a comprehensive epistemological and methodological model of educational action research based on all of the work discussed above. Adelman (1997) notes Kemmis' connection with the British Humanities Curriculum Project and Grundy (1997) documents the Australian context of action research work. Kemmis (2001) documents his own affinity with the work of German critical theorist Jurgen Habermas and the influence it has had on his conceptions of an 'emancipatory action research' framework.

This work is significant both in its scope and in its drawing together of the divergent traditions of action research that have developed across various

contexts. Carr and Kemmis (1986) state that the two aims of all action research are to “improve” and “involve” (p. 165). Furthermore they argue that:

. . . three conditions are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for action research to be said to exist: firstly, a project takes as its subject-matter a social practice, regarding it as a form of strategic action susceptible of improvement; secondly, the project proceeds through a spiral of cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting, with each of these activities being systematically and self-critically implemented and interrelated; Thirdly, the project involves those responsible for the practice in each of the moments of the activity, widening participation in the project gradually to include others affected by the practice and maintaining collaborative control of the process (pp. 165-166).

Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998) describe action research as a ‘social,’ ‘participatory,’ ‘practical,’ ‘collaborative,’ ‘emancipatory,’ ‘critical,’ and ‘recursive’ learning process “whose fruits are the real and material changes in what people do, how they interact with the world and with others, what they mean and what they value and the discourses in which they understand and interpret their world” (p. 25). In articulating their conception of action research they incorporate Lewin’s characterization of action research as a spiral of steps that include observing, planning acting and reflecting (Kemmis and Wilkinson, 1998), Elliott and Adelman’s use of action research for engaging practitioners in the research of their own practices (Adelman, 1997), the German’s use of Habermas’s ideas in critical theory (Altrichter and Gstettner, 1997), the political and ethical beliefs embodied in participatory research

practices (Fals-Borda, 2001) and the dissatisfaction with traditional social science approaches familiar to all.

Without breaking into a discussion of the specific foundations and theoretical positions which will be discussed in later chapters it is important to acknowledge that contemporary action research has been influenced tremendously through this Australian work. Equally important is to recognize that while this work benefits from all of the work that came before it and its ongoing dialogue with these traditions as they developed, it is not necessarily a definitive articulation of contemporary action research. Kemmis (2001) represents a distinct tradition within the action research family. Other traditions have continued to grow and develop in their own right and emphasize work within their particular contexts in ways quite differently than does Kemmis and his colleagues. Kemmis argues from an interest in education research that includes a broad understanding of the link between education and society (Kemmis and Wilkinson, 1998). Other work in Australia, notably Stringer's (1999) work with Aboriginals, places itself within a different action research tradition while it continues to acknowledge the influences of the Kemmis' work.

In closing it is important to re-emphasize that while I have attempted to briefly acknowledge some of the main proponents of contemporary action research as it developed I have undoubtedly missed significant contributions. I have compressed the rich histories of all of the traditions that I have presented, I have organized them around my own interpretations of them and

I have inevitably not acknowledged contributions that others will consider important. Notably, Reason and Bradbury (2001) include contributions from feminist (Maguire, 2001), humanist (Rowan, 2001), social constructivist (Lincoln, 2001) and systems theory (Flood, 2001) in their presentation of the groundings of action research. Certainly these schools of thought have had an impact on how individual action researchers make sense of and explain their understandings of their practices that cannot be ignored. I will explore some of these contributions further in the following chapters.

## ***Chapter Six***

### ***Common Themes in Action Research.***

From the history provided in the previous chapter, one is able to begin to discern some of the features of action research. Yet, just as it is impossible to provide a single, coherent history of action research (Reason and Bradbury, 2001), it is similarly impossible to provide a single, coherent definition of action research. The action research family consists of a number of different approaches all informed and organized around different values, assumptions and beliefs. Each, however, strives to be explicit about these values, assumptions and beliefs and embraces them as an essential feature of the research process.

As a group, action researchers are critical of notions that suggest that research can be a value-free, objective, and detached process. Instead, action researchers accept that because research is an inherently social process conducted by social beings, each individual brings with them their own social histories, beliefs, motivations, outlooks and intentions (Kemmis and Wilkinson, 1998). Such an approach, while not being unique to action research necessarily, sets the stage on which action research is conceptualized, enacted and understood. It lays a foundation on which action researchers build their understandings of, and justifications for, their particular approach.

What follows is an exploration of some of the common themes in action research. It is important to recognize that while most approaches in action research reach similar conclusions on these themes, each arrives at them in a different way. Different action research traditions will address these issues in different ways so that what follows is not definitive of all action research approaches but is rather a sampling of how some significant contributors to the literature have dealt with the issues at hand.

### ***Definitions of Action Research***

Stringer (1999) suggests that action research is differentiated from traditional research approaches by three common themes. He states that in general all approaches to action research:

- . . . acknowledge a fundamental investment in processes that
- Are rigorously empirical and reflective (interpretive)
- Encourage people who have traditionally been called *subjects* as active participants in the research process
- Results in some practical outcome related to the lives or work of participants (p.xviii).

At its roots, then, action research is concerned with working collaboratively with participants in a process of research. It is also concerned with collecting, analyzing and interpreting information with them in a way that results in some practical outcome for the participants.

At first glance this might appear definitive. Such a statement captures an essence of what action research is about and it articulates ideas that are

recognizable in a wide variety of action research literature. Yet, such a statement also raises many more questions than it answers. What does 'working collaboratively' mean? In what way is it a 'process of research?' What makes the outcome 'practical' and how is such defined? Is the focus on 'research' or 'action?' And how are the aims of the two reconciled? Unfortunately there are no simple, straightforward answers to these questions. The answers that you would get from action researchers would reflect both the interests of the researcher and the particular framework from which they were operating. Yet, it is also the very answers to these questions provided by the action research literature that bind the various approaches together.

Hart and Bond (1995) have developed a typology of action research in an attempt to demonstrate how action research is able to maintain a distinct identity while at the same time span a wide range of diverse approaches and theoretical positions. They present seven criteria which they argue distinguish action research from other methodologies. These criteria operate in dynamic interaction with each other and through the positions that various schools of action research take on these criteria it is possible to distinguish different types of action research. Hart and Bond's criteria are that:

Action research: (1) is educative; (2) deals with individuals as member of social groups; (3) is problem focused, context-specific and future-oriented; (4) involves a change intervention; (5) aims at improvement and involvement; (6) involves a cyclic process in which research, action and evaluation are interlinked; (7) is founded on a research

relationship in which those involved are participants in the change process. (p. 39)

From these criteria, they suggest, that four types of action research can be distinguished. These four types are 'experimental,' 'organizational,' 'professionalizing' and 'empowering' (p. 38). Different types of action research will be elaborated on within the next chapter so I will not discuss these types here beyond noting that Hart and Bond's typology, as they themselves note, is necessarily a simplification that provides some orientation to various types of action research while sacrificing some of the finer distinctions that adherents to various schools of action research would consider very important. I will return to this typology later as I discuss some of the challenges and distinctions that action research tries to address.

As noted in the previous chapter, Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998) provide us with different criteria in describing action research. From Lewin (see Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988), they characterize action research as a spiral of self-reflective cycles of planning, acting, observing, reflecting and re-planning, acting, observing, reflecting and so forth. Along with each of these steps, they contend, are six key features of action research. They are that action research is (1) a social process; (2) participatory; (3) practical and collaborative; (4) emancipatory; (5) critical, and; (6) recursive (reflective, dialectical) (Kemmis and Wilkinson). The reader will note some similarities and differences between this list of key features and Hart and Bond's (1995) seven distinguishing criteria. These differences begin to show the difficulty of

not only establishing a single coherent definition of action research but also how, within action research, differences appear based on the values, beliefs and assumptions that individuals bring to their work.

I will not assume that this work is any different. My own perspective will shape and constrain what I am presenting here. That said, it is my argument that despite the differences above, action research has some specific ideas on research, participation, and action that, while not identical between schools of thought, share some common features. Greenwood and Levin (1998) state that “action research refers to the conjunction of three elements: research, action and participation. Unless all three elements are present, the process cannot be called action research” (p. 6). It is the position that action research takes on these three elements that separate it from other research methodologies. These elements are inclusive of Hart and Bond’s (1995) typology and Kemmis and Wilkinson’s (1998) key elements while allowing room for their differences to emerge. Moreover, understanding how action research understands these three elements requires that we explore its dissatisfaction with traditional social research practices, its alternative worldview, its positions on knowledge, power and participation and its conceptualization of the action research process.

### ***Dissatisfaction with Traditional Social Research Practices***

As noted throughout the discussion of action research so far, contemporary action research emerges from a growing dissatisfaction with

traditional research practices within the social sciences. The major source of this dissatisfaction is a growing recognition of the limitations of these traditions in effecting real, meaningful change for the individuals and groups who are plagued by the problems that are the focus of such research. Action research adopts an explicit position. Stringer (1999) states that:

. . . the mere recording of events and formulation by an uninvolved researcher is inadequate in and of itself. (p. 10)

[rather, action research's] primary purpose is as a practical tool for solving problems experienced by people in their professional, community or private lives. If an action research project does not *make a difference*, in a specific way, for practitioners and/or clients, then it has failed to achieve its objectives. (emphasis in original, p.11)

Action researchers contend that the problem with dominant research traditions is that in pursuing 'knowledge for knowledge's sake' they fail to recognize how they continue to perpetuate conditions of oppression, manipulation and exploitation of the disadvantaged in our midst (Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991; Smith, Willms and Johnson, 1997).

Carr and Kemmis (1986) and Winter and Munn-Giddings (2001) identify two dominant schools of thought in traditional research. Carr and Kemmis identify these as the 'positivist' and 'interpretive' views. The positivist tradition in science is generally seen as being based on the views of Auguste Comte that have been taken up, refined and popularized by succeeding generations of scientists. Comte's hopes were that social sciences could become a basis for the development of knowledge that was "free from

dependence on political values and religious or metaphysical beliefs” (Winter and Munn-Giddings: p. 15) by adopting the unbiased and law-like structure of the physical sciences (e.g. physics). Positivist approaches in social sciences subsequently seek to derive law-like explanations of social phenomena through detached observation and experimental techniques aimed at determining the causal features of a given phenomenon. The underlying belief is that there is an observable ‘reality’ that exists and that science’s role is to examine this reality through neutral observation and experimentation so that it may be predicted and controlled.

Certainly this view of science has come under significant criticism and refute over the past 40 or so years. Carr and Kemmis (1986), drawing from Thomas Kuhn, suggest that the positivist conception of objective knowledge is nothing more than a myth. Their argument, drawn from a substantial and widely acknowledged body of literature on the topic\*, is that knowledge is always constructed within a pre-existing theoretical framework. These frameworks or ‘paradigms’ structure both our understandings and our interpretations (observations) in particular ways and they are informed by a complex structure of underlying assumptions, values and beliefs. Positivism’s position of ‘neutral observation’, itself but one of a number of possible paradigms, is not possible because such a position is informed by the values, beliefs and assumptions about the world that have given it shape.

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\* Carr and Kemmis (1986) provide a relatively extensive discussion and critique of traditional research traditions that is significant here. Readers are referred to them both for the discussion and for further references to works that explore these issues more extensively.

Furthermore, the argument goes, ignoring this fact, as positivism does, disguises and distorts the observations and interpretations it makes in ways that support and further reinforce its own theoretical perspective rather than achieve the 'unbiased' understanding of a given phenomena that it suggests is possible.

Interpretive approaches to research, according to Carr and Kemmis (1986) recognize the problems noted above and instead seek to explore the ways in which people understand, interpret and construct meaning in their lives. Such approaches suggest that knowledge is constructed by social actors as they interact, experience and make sense of the world in which they live. Such knowledge, the argument goes, is shaped and informed by the values, beliefs and assumptions that such actors bring to any given situation. Such values, beliefs and assumptions, furthermore, are shaped by the cultural rules embodied within the social contexts of such actors' lives. Behaviour, in this context, is seen as shaped by, and understood in relation to, the ways in which individual's intentions, motivations and choices are constituted by their knowledge constructions (Carr and Kemmis). The emphasis of interpretive research traditions, then, is on exploring the ways in which people make sense of their worlds and the ways in which such meaning making informs the choices that they make.

The problem with such approaches, according to Carr and Kemmis (1986) is that simply establishing consensual interpretations of the meanings and intentions of social actors is not enough. By focusing on 'consensual'

interpretations such approaches do not take into account the unintended consequences of individuals actions that cannot be explained in reference to the individual's intentions and of which they are not aware.

Additionally, such approaches do not offer a way to explain any variances between what an individual says and what an individual does. Carr and Kemmis (1986) state:

The ways in which people characterize their actions may be at variance with what they are really doing so that their understandings and explanations may be no more than rationalizations that obscure the true nature of their situation and mask reality in some important way. Explanations of how and why this occurs may take the form of a theoretical account that demonstrates how the understandings of individuals may be conditioned by 'false consciousness,' and how certain social mechanisms operate to bind people to irrational and distorted ideas about social reality. They may also try to reveal, at a social structural level, the ideological character of group life by showing how social processes such as language and the processes of cultural production and reproduction shape our experience of the social world in specific ways and for specific purposes. (p. 96)

According to Carr and Kemmis, social processes have a way of both being constituted by, and constitutive of, individual's actions and the meaning that they give them. If this is true, Carr and Kemmis suggest, we need "a mode of inquiry where individuals' own interpretations can be critically reconsidered and assessed" (p.97).

This is the crux of the problem for action research. For Carr and Kemmis (1986) both positivism and interpretive inquiry traditions have been

developed within frameworks that tend to support and reproduce the values, beliefs and assumptions that have shaped them. By adopting positions of “detached observers” who collect, analyse and report the data, both traditions do not adequately account for how their own process of interpretation and engagement impact the organization and presentation of the data (Winter and Munn-Giddings, 2001). And, importantly, such traditions do not adequately reflect the ways in which individuals outside of these traditions value, generate and make use of knowledge in their daily lives (Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991).

It is important that we recognize that these criticisms are not necessarily directed at quantitative and qualitative methods in a wholesale way. Although this is not clear from the above, Carr and Kemmis (1986) and Winter and Munn-Giddings (2001) are not suggesting that because of their criticisms that all methods that result from these traditions are patently unsound. Rather, in the case of quantitative methodologies, Winter and Munn-Giddings suggest, “social statistics can reveal patterns, confirm the existence of problems and suggest directions for further inquiry” (p.15). By recognizing its limitations, quantitative research can contribute significantly to a detailed inquiry.

Moreover, the criticisms of the interpretive tradition are more specifically directed at inquiry rooted in postmodern relativism. These positions assert that ‘truth’ is entirely relative and that there is no way to effectively mediate between competing truth claims because each is rooted in

it's own equally valid subjective realities. Winter and Munn-Giddings (2001) point out that:

Human discourse is founded on the assumption that we can discriminate between well-founded and less well-founded judgements concerning reality. Otherwise, most human interactions would be unintelligible, not only decisions about when it is safe to cross a road but also philosophical arguments in favour of relativism, which always include the selection of supporting evidence. (p.258)

The argument that Carr and Kemmis (1986), and action research as a whole, puts forth is not one that suggests we should discard well established research methods (in fact action researcher are often encouraged to use such methods within their inquiries) but rather is one that argues that we need to rethink and reorganize our approaches to research so that they better reflect the ways in which social actors construct and use knowledge in their daily lives and so that they do not continue to perpetuate patterns of domination that rob people of control over their lives.

Action research contends that it offers the possibility of such an approach. Action research intends to take an involved, collaborative position that is directed at creating change in a problematic situation shared by the participants in the research. It contends that the process of inquiry inevitably has an impact on the situation being investigated and as such it is never a static situation. Furthermore action research suggests that since the research situation is not static and researchers do have an influence on the situation that researchers have a moral obligation to work towards ensuring that the

effects of the research are of direct benefit to those involved (Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991; Stringer, 1991).

### ***An Alternative Worldview***

To support this position Reason and Bradbury (2001) suggest that we need an alternative to the views that support positivist and interpretive traditions. They posit a 'participatory' worldview which they contend can effectively support and explain action research. They state that a participatory worldview:

. . . competes with both the positivism of modern times and with the deconstructive postmodern alternative—and we would hold it to be a more adequate and creative paradigm for our times. . . It follows positivism in arguing that there is a 'real' reality, a primeval givenness of being (of which we partake) and draws on the constructionist perspective in acknowledging that as soon as we attempt to articulate this we enter a world of human language and cultural expression. Any account of the given cosmos in the spoken and written word is culturally framed. (p. 7)

Their worldview is characterized by a 'participatory/evolutionary reality' which takes a 'relational/ecological form.' Knowledge is generated within practical being and acting' and necessarily draws on 'extended epistemologies' which continuously inquire into the 'meaning and purpose' of our actions.

This view sees reality as both objectively and subjectively determined. Our understanding (knowledge) of the world is created through our (inter)actions within the world. It suggests that these are shaped both by the

ecological contexts in which we act and by our interpretations, meaning constructions and (inter)actions within that context. Thus, Reason and Bradbury (2001) suggest,

We live in a participatory world. There is a primordial givenness of being in which the human bodymind actively participates in a co-creative dance which gives rise to the reality we experience. Subject and object are interdependent. This participation is fundamental to the nature of our being. (p. 8)

According to this view, we exist as part of an interdependent whole within which we necessarily participate. It emphasizes “a multiplicity of ways of knowing that start from a relationship between self and other” (Ibid., p. 9). Knowledge is not something that is generated from a position of isolation and detachment from the world but is rather something that is created in our “everyday practices of acting in relationship and creating meaning in our lives” (ibid., p.9).

Such a view has tremendous implications for how we conduct research. It challenges the notion that knowledge can exist as something separate from the context in which it was created. If we are embodied within a participatory reality where knowledge is created through our (inter)actions within that reality, it can not be separated from the context (physical, social, historical) and the actions that gave rise to it. Furthermore, if such a position is accepted, then knowledge generation is no longer something that occurs through tightly controlled and formalized procedures but rather it is something that we are all engaged with in our everyday existence.

### ***Knowledge, Power and Participation***

Action research adopts such a view by starting with an assumption that people have the ability to generate knowledge about their own lives and the capacity to solve the problems that they encounter (Smith, 1997). For action research this means departing from the 'detached observer' and 'expert' research role and taking on an involved, committed and collaborative role that acknowledges and values the ways in which all participants construct knowledge within their daily lives. McNiff (2002) states that "action researchers see knowledge as something they do, as a living process" (p. 18). This is also reflected in Fals-Borda's (1991) emphasis on the importance of 'popular knowledge' and his suggestion that such knowledge "does not come in the form of isolated facts known to specific individuals. It comes in packets of cultural data generated by social groups" (p. 150).

Chaudhary's (1997) discussion of the different characteristics of dominant and popular modes of knowledge production is relevant here. She argues that dominant and formalized systems of knowledge production are characterized by isolation, individualistic pursuit, abstract issues, sectional interests, and centralized control. She argues that such approaches contribute to "creating a possessiveness about knowledge (and information) and encourage its use for carving out a position for the individual in power mechanisms" (p. 119). 'Popular' modes of knowledge construction, in contrast, are characterized by interaction, collective pursuit, concrete and

common issues and decentralization (ibid.). She argues that they are shaped through the “exchange of experiences, ideas, stories, songs, anecdotes and so on” (p. 120). Their interactive nature ensures that they are not dominated by any one individual or interest but rather are shared and available for everyone’s benefit.

Positioning knowledge production within the realm of everyday experience and action highlights the relationship between knowledge production and power. Action research contends that traditional research methods, legitimated through universities and dominant power structures, serve to perpetuate their own interests (Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991; Greenwood and Levin, 1998). By making research the domain of ‘experts’ and ‘neutral’ observers, research in these traditions is conducted ‘on’ people and the knowledge generated more directly serves the interests of the researchers as they publish papers, complete dissertations, and enhance their status within the existing power structures (Greenwood and Levin, 2001). By locating knowledge production within the local contexts of everyday lives, action researchers seek to democratize the research process (Stringer, 1999). They require that we ask the questions “Knowledge for what?” and “Knowledge for whom?” (McNiff, 2002). And, they insist, that action research become a process of research ‘with’ and ‘for’ people (Heron and Reason, 2001) that results in some practical benefit for the people it involves (Stringer).

Consequently action research must be based on the group's needs as opposed to the researcher's. To accomplish this Fals-Borda (1991) argues that:

Grassroots representatives and cadres should be able to participate as reference groups in the action research process from the very beginning—that is, from the moment it is decided what the subject of the research will be. And they should remain involved at every step of the process. (p. 149)

McTaggart (1997) makes a distinction between 'participation' and 'involvement' here and insists that participation includes real influence in the decisions regarding the topic of inquiry, the selection of methods, the collection and analysis of the data and the design and implementation of any changes. This serves two purposes. It works to ensure that the process is driven and controlled by local actors rather than the external researcher's interests and it works to support local actors in taking ownership and control over their own knowledge and solutions (Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991).

Such collaboration, however, does not mean that researcher's views, skills and knowledge are disregarded. Action research embraces the diversity of the group and believes that the multiple perspectives inherent in any group create opportunities for establishing a more comprehensive understanding of the situation under study (Greenwood and Levin, 1998). With its interest in 'local' or 'popular' knowledge, action research does not simply uncritically accept the constructions generated by the group. To do so would support the relativist notions that it has rejected. Rather action

research adopts a dialectical view of rationality (Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Smith, 1997; Winter and Munn-Giddings, 2001) which seeks to critically examine the contradictions inherent in different perspectives on a given situation.

Winter and Munn-Giddings (2001) express that the basic principles of dialectics are

1. that societies (and social relationships) consist of opposing forces;
2. that social change is created by the practical struggles between these opposing forces;
3. that adequate understanding must involve a grasp of these contradictions and the processes of social change through which they are temporarily resolved and continuously transformed;
4. that adequate understanding includes both critique and causal explanation of social events, in order to establish the possibilities and limits of change;
5. that the growth of knowledge is a self-emancipatory process based on practical action. (p.261)

From this perspective terms previously viewed as opposed and mutually exclusive such as 'thought' and 'action', 'science' and 'popular knowledge', or 'objective' and 'subjective' become partial and mutually related elements that together are constitutive of social situations (Carr and Kemmis, 1986).

Knowledge is obtained through the exploration and critique of a given situation that includes an examination of the multiple perspectives inherent in, and which give shape to, that situation. New knowledge and change is

created through the transformation of understandings generated in the practical struggle of such an examination. Furthermore, the goal of such examinations is to “understand how to change the situation in such a way that it is no longer determined by forces we experience as unjust or oppressive but by those we accept or desire” (Winter and Munn-Giddings, 2001, p.261).

### ***Action Research Processes***

Action research purports to achieve this through its constant spiral of reflection and action. Smith (1997) states:

Using only one process without the other is limiting. Reflection alone leads to informed passivity. Action alone leads to sporadic, sometimes chaotic, results with much potential for authoritarian controls over decision making. (p. 187)

Action research intends to join the two processes together so that action informs reflection and reflection informs further action. It seeks to join a group of individuals together so that they may examine the forces that have both given shape to and constrained a situation they consider problematic so that they may better understand how to change it in ways that better suit their needs. Action research recognizes that the process is never definitive and that the individuals and the group’s new understandings will have to be tested in action and again critically examined for the effects that they produce (McNiff, 2002). It is through the repetitive process of reflection and action that the group is able to transform the situation and is able to strengthen their understanding and influence in that situation (Smith, 1997).

Greenwood and Levin (1998) suggest that this process more accurately reflects the actual behaviour of individuals as they solve problems they encounter in real life and the behaviour of 'scientists' as they are engaged in the process of 'research' in the natural sciences. As such, they argue, action research holds the promise of making the process of research in the social sciences more transparent and the promise of more effectively supporting efforts of social change.

Greenwood and Levin (1998) relate a lecture given by a prominent Nobel Prize winning chemist on his experience of the scientific method to support this. They note how:

Repeatedly, he emphasized that science is a collective activity carried out by members of research teams within a larger scientific community. The larger community provides the literature on which the research is built to some degree, as well as the resources used to carry out the research. The research team and the laboratory form a complex, dynamic social system of people acting on phenomena and sharing their thoughts within the pragmatic limitations set by the availability of key resources and the dynamics of the human relationships involved.  
(p.64)

'Scientific' research, they contend, is not the detached, neutral observations characterized by traditional social science methodologies. Rather they argue that it is a social process where groups of individuals create hypotheses and then test these hypotheses out in action. 'Scientists' reflect upon the results of their actions in order to better understand the interactions and the contexts in which the results were achieved. It is a process that is shaped by the

actions and reflections of those who have come before them and by the contexts in which the scientists operate. It relies on a constant process of reflection and action where hypotheses are constantly refined until success is achieved. The success of the research is measured in terms of the workability of the hypotheses eventually developed and the impact that they have on understanding and explaining the situation under investigation (see Greenwood and Levin, 1998, pp. 57-64).

Action research, Greenwood and Levin (1998) suggest, mirrors this process within the social sciences. It is a process that is enacted within a specific context by a specific group of individuals whose aim is to examine a situation in order to change it and to change a situation in order to examine it (Kemmis and Wilkinson, 1998). They argue that its success is found in the workability of the actions taken and the credibility of the explanations offered. Its status as 'research' lies in its systematic and critical examination of the forces and interpretations that have given shape to a social situation. Its status as 'scientific' lies in its documentation of both the investigative processes used and the interpretations drawn from them in sufficient detail for others to evaluate the conclusions drawn and the actions taken (Greenwood and Levin, 1998). Furthermore, by demanding that thought not be separated from action and that theory be tested for its ability to solve real life problems, Greenwood and Levin argue that action research generally takes on more complex and challenging problems than do the conventional social sciences.

In the end, then, action research is an approach to social science research that rejects the pursuit of knowledge for knowledge's sake. It requires that researchers engage in processes that support local actors in the examination, interpretation and transformation of a situation that is of concern to them. It views social realities as dialectically created in the interaction between the understandings we bring to a situation, the actions that we take as a result of these understandings, and the 'objective' features of the situation at that particular time. It requires that we join together with others in order to systematically and critically examine the forces (including our own actions, values, beliefs and assumptions) that have given shape to our interpretations of a given situation so that we may better understand and effectively change that situation in ways that benefit all involved.

Action research embraces the diversity of knowledge created within a variety of perspectives and seeks to bring them all together in a forum where they can be explored for what they are and the impacts that they have in our lives. It hopes that through such an exploration lives can be improved and people can be supported in achieving the improvements in their lives that they desire. Action research has lofty goals and grand aspirations that reach beyond the traditional social sciences as it seeks to enrich the world in which we live.

Certainly there are critics of this approach that suggest that action research is little more than a glorified problem solving process that is "unsystematic, atheoretical, storytelling" (Greenwood and Levin, 1998, p. 75).

Other traditions in the social sciences question action research's ability to produce results that are meaningful beyond the specific situation in which it is conducted and suggest that it does not constitute 'reliable' or 'valid' research. Different traditions within the action research family address these challenges differently and it is to these questions that we will turn in the following chapters as we explore the convergences between action research and child and youth care and some of the possibilities that action research holds for incorporating research into practice.

**Section Three:**  
**Child and Youth Care and Action Research:**  
***Towards the Use of Action Research in Child and Youth Care Practice***

There are a number of convergences in action research and child and youth care. This final section seeks to explore these convergences and to explore the possibilities of action research for incorporating research into child and youth care practice. As noted in the introduction to this thesis, for any approach to incorporating research into child and youth care practice to be sustained and taken up by practitioners themselves, it will need to be flexible and adaptive to that practice. Child and youth care workers are, by definition, committed first and foremost to the children, youth and families with whom they work.

The challenge of incorporating research into practice is one of conflicting loyalties. In traditional conceptualizations, research brings a number of predefined expectations about the type of questions asked, the processes for the collection and interpretation of data and the procedures followed in conducting the research to the research situation. In child and youth care, workers strive to follow their client's needs. If incorporating research into practice leads to the focus on client's issues and needs being compromised in favour of the research process then child and youth care workers will not engage in research within their practice as a matter of principle.

The process in child and youth care belongs to the children, youth and families who are undertaking it. The child and youth care worker is a facilitator, supporter and resource person for the children, youth and families rather than a director of the process. Any research that is conducted in practice by child and youth care workers needs to be compatible with their role. It is my contention that action research offers a possibility for such a process. The following section details this contention in three parts. It explores the convergence of values, beliefs and assumptions in child and youth care and action research, it explores some possibilities for action research in child and youth care practice and it offers my reflections on some of the challenges and implications for child and youth care as we move forward.

## ***Chapter Seven***

### ***Convergences***

In the previous sections I have offered a view of some of the salient features of action research and child and youth care. Throughout both of these sections I have attempted to provide the reader with a sense of the ways in which both child and youth care workers and action researchers conceptualize their fields. From these sections the reader has likely already begun to see some of the similarities that exist between action research and child and youth care. This chapter will seek to make some of these similarities explicit and to explore some ways that action research and child and youth care practice share similar visions.

Anglin (1999) identified five characteristics that he believed were definitional of child and youth care. These characteristics included child and youth care's participation in the daily lives and activities of children, youth and families. They noted how child and youth care practice was interested in promoting the growth, development and competence of its clients and they included the importance of relationships in these tasks.

Hart and Bond (1995) similarly identify the characteristics that are shared by various action research approaches. They assert that action research's interest is in being 'educative' or in contributing to supporting the growth, development and empowerment of individuals and groups within

society. They acknowledge its commitment to democratic, participatory and equitable relationships and its belief in the power of these relationships to 'improve and involve' (Carr and Kemmis, 1986). They stress action research's focus on the 'process' as opposed to the 'product' of research and support the notion that action research is research 'with' and 'for' others as opposed to research 'on' others (Heron and Reason, 2001).

Examined together, action research and child and youth care are not so far apart. They take, as their focus, different topics yet at their centre, they share some common goals and beliefs. Similarities are evident in the way both processes unfold. Models of the child and youth care intervention (Eisikovits, Beker and Guttman, 1991; Garfat and Newcomen, 1992) bear close resemblance to the action research spiral of observing, reflecting, planning and acting. Moreover, both disciplines are grounded in context, founded in action, realized in relationships and focused on supporting the learning, growth and development of others. These features, while enacted and defined in slightly different ways, are fundamental features of both schools of thought. They are the features that both action research and child and youth care see as central to their existence and they are the features that both disciplines believe differentiate them from allied approaches and traditions in their respective corners of the world.

### ***Grounded in Context***

Anglin (1999) asserts that “Child and youth care is based on (but not restricted to) *direct, day to day work with children and youth in their environment*” (emphasis in original, p. 142). For Kreuger (1991a) child and youth care is about ‘meeting them where they are at’ and for Mattingly et al. (2001) it involves the adoption of a developmental-ecological perspective which “emphasizes the interaction between persons and their physical and social environments, including cultural and political settings” (p. 22). For Bronfenbrenner (1979) understanding human development requires that attention be paid to the contextual features of a person’s environment and for child and youth care the context is where development and change invariably occurs.

Since its inception as a field of study and practice, child and youth care has been concerned with the contexts of its work (Trieschman et al., 1969). It has grown from its roots in residential care to involvement with children, youth and families in many areas of their lives (Ferguson, Pence and Denholm, 1993) and it sees its role as supporting children youth and families in overcoming the difficulties that they face through engagement within these contexts as opposed to providing direction from the periphery (Anglin, 1999; Fewster, 1990a).

Such a focus has some important implications for child and youth care practice. Child and youth care workers must become personally involved in

the day-to-day lives of the people with whom they work. They share, for a time, a life space with children, youth and families that does not belong to, and is not directed, by them. Such involvement requires that child and youth care workers respect and honour the privilege they have been given and it requires that they do not bring with them preconceived notions or prescriptive requirements for the inhabitants of that space.

This does not mean that anything goes and that child and youth care workers must simply accept what they find. Practitioners have a moral, ethical and legal responsibility to ensure the safety of everyone concerned (Mattingly et al., 2001). However, as Krueger (1991a) notes, it does mean 'meeting them where they are at', and as Fewster (1990b) and Ricks (1989) note, it means entering into the situation with a clear sense of self. Yet, as Durkin (2001) notes, child and youth care's effectiveness exists in becoming involved in the contexts of children, youth and families lives and supporting them in building on the strengths, capacities and competencies that they already have. Each person is different and, as Garfat (1995) has observed, effective child and youth care practice must tailor its interactions to the needs and circumstances of each particular situation.

Action research shares a similar view. On the whole action research is critical of approaches to research that suggest that knowledge can be generated from a position of detachment. As has been discussed they see such approaches as disconnected from the realities of everyday experience and vested more in the interests of the researchers than those of the

researched (Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991; Greenwood and Levin, 1998). Like Brofenbrenner (1979) action researchers believe that understanding must be grounded in the contexts of the phenomena under investigation and that those contexts must be explored from a variety of perspectives (Kemmis and Wilkinson, 1998).

For action research, its effectiveness as a process is tied up with its grounding in context. For Kemmis (2001) action research cannot achieve its goals unless it becomes intimately involved in the contexts under investigation. For Smith et al. (1997), action research's focus on liberation requires that action researchers become participants in a local process of investigation, analysis and action that is lead and determined by the community and people with whom action research is involved. For Greenwood and Levin (1998) and Stringer (1999), action research is about supporting organizations' and communities' own attempts to find particular solutions for particular places and particular situations. Grounding in context is the only way that this can be done.

### ***Founded in Action***

Yet, grounding in context is only part of the picture. As noted above, child and youth care is not only interested in the contexts of children, youth and families lives but it is interested in becoming involved in them as part of its process. It is not enough to simply seek to understand. Child and youth care is about 'being there', 'teaming up', and 'interacting together' (Krueger,

1991a). It is a process of “*self (worker and youth) in action*” (Krueger, 1994, p. 299) and it requires involvement and (inter)action. Maier (1994) notes that “the sophistication of care practice rests in the minute reciprocal interactions between workers and children” (p.11). It is through child and youth care’s active participation in the daily lives of children, youth and families that differences are made.

Child and youth care is about both context and activity, the two are mutually constitutive of each other. By joining children and youth in activity, Maier (1994, 1995) suggests, child and youth care practitioners develop attachment relationships that support those children and youth in taking the risks to explore, change and expand their worlds. It is not about meeting in offices or classrooms (although these activities sometimes occur). It is about joining in the daily lives through the things such as play, recreation, and care. It is about having fun together and enjoying each other’s company. And, it is about caring through sharing in supporting the completion of daily tasks (homework, doctors appointments, grocery shopping) and the activities of daily lives (wake ups, mealtimes, bedtimes, playtimes and worktimes).

As expressed in previous sections, practice and action is central in child and youth care. Its interest in becoming actively involved in the day-to-day lives of the children, youth and families that it serves is one of the key aspects that differentiates child and youth care from other professions (Anglin, 1999) and it is what child and youth care workers are interested in doing. Observation and understanding only take us so far. Child and youth

care workers define their role, as a matter of principle, as one of action. They want to do something about the difficulties, struggles and challenges that they witness and they are interested in just what it is that they can do to make a difference (Felicetti, 1987; Fewster, 1990a; Garfat 1995).

Again, action research adopts a similar view. Action researchers believe that the “mere recording of events and formulation by an uninvolved researcher is inadequate in and of itself” (Stringer, 1999, p.10). Rather action research is interested in promoting and developing change as part of its inquiry process (McNiff, 2002; Winter and Munn-Giddings, 2001). For Smith (1997) action and reflection are mutually constitutive aspects of action research and learning occurs through the process of taking action and reflecting upon the outcomes of that action. Without both taking action and reflecting upon it, learning cannot occur.

For Greenwood and Levin (1998) understanding is not only bound up in the contexts in which it occurs but it is also dependent upon the workability of the explanations it offers and the effectiveness of the solutions it provides. Such understanding is developed through the observation and investigation of the situation under study and through the development and implementation of solutions that can be examined and evaluated. Without such action we only develop a partial picture of a situation that remains to be tested out. We do not have a very complete picture because we do not know the impacts or effectiveness of our understanding as applied in the context of people’s everyday lives.

Furthermore, action research believes that researchers have an obligation to make a difference in the lives of those with whom they study (Heron and Reason, 2001; Stringer, 1999). They criticize other research traditions for taking from others to achieve their own ends (Greenwood and Levin, 2001; Fals Borda, 1997) and insist that social sciences research must become involved in giving more back to the situations that it studies. Action research responds to its own criticisms by insisting that the aims of the research be not only to generate new knowledge and understanding but to also generate workable solutions to the problems and struggles that people experience in their everyday lives (Smith et al., 1997). Research and action come together with each other to support others in producing their own knowledge and their own solutions to the problems they are experiencing (Stringer).

### ***Realized in Relationship***

Thus, if grounding in context and founding in action is what defines and differentiates child and youth care and action research from other traditions, it is through relationships that both realize their goals. We have already seen the importance of relationships to child and youth care in previous chapters and it is important to revisit this within the present context. As noted previously, it is through the development of caring, supportive attachment relationships that child and youth care practitioners are able to support children, youth and families in their own development (Maier, 1994). These

relationships are critical and child and youth care is increasingly stressing the importance of such.

Mattingly et al. (2001) present relationship and communication as a core competency for child and youth care practice. Maier et al. (1995) emphasises the centrality of relationships in child and youth care practice and Garfat (1995) demonstrates how relationships are the vehicle through which effective child and youth care work is done. Fewster (1990b) reminds us that it is through relationship that we come to know and experience and Ricks (1989) reminds us of the importance of self-awareness in developing effective, intentional relationships with children, youth and families. Without relationship, child and youth care cannot be grounded in context, or founded in action because it is through relationships that both occur.

Yet it is not just any relationship that child and youth care is concerned with. It has in mind a specific concept of relationship that it takes as central to its work. Such relationships are characterized by caring, empathy, and positive regard (Austin and Halpin, 1987; Mattingly et al., 2001). They strive to be mutual, collaborative and respectful of the resources, strengths and capabilities that all bring to the interaction (Bertolino and Thompson, 1999). Child and youth care workers must bring to such relationships a belief in the ability of children, youth and families to change and a belief in the ability to accomplish such change in the context of the supportive relationships they create together (ibid.).

In order to accomplish this, child and youth care workers must take the time to understand how they 'are' in such relationships (Fester 1990a; Ricks, 1989). They must reflect on their actions and they must develop an understanding of the ways in which their own values, beliefs, ethics, thought and feelings inform such actions (Ricks, 1989). They must develop such awareness in the moment and they must learn to match the rhythms of those with whom they are engaged (Krueger, 1994). Such relationships are multi-dimensional (Fewster, 1990b; Mazzocchi, 1999) and reciprocal (Ricks, 1992). They are most effective when "there is a personal gain or benefit to *both* participants" (emphasis in original, Thompson, 1997) and when "a context is created for the youth to have a different experiencing of herself and/or the meaning which she gives to her experiencing" (Garfat, 1995, p. 218).

Action research comes to similar conclusions even though it reaches them in a different way. Action research values participation in the research process. It is concerned with conducting research 'with' and 'for' as opposed to 'on' participants (Heron and Reason, 2001) and it sees participation as a way to extend the understandings developed within the research process (Greenwood and Levin, 1998). Relationships become central in that it is through relationships that participation is developed and it is through relationships that the process is possible (Stringer, 1999).

Like child and youth care, action research is concerned with a specific type of relationship. Stringer (1991) expresses that relationships in action research must be equal, harmonious, accepting, cooperative and sensitive.

Tilakaratna (1991) discusses how such relationships cannot be based upon domination and dependence but rather they must facilitate the ability of local actors to take over and develop the ongoing process. Kemmis (2001) notes that action research requires that relationships support others in their own process as to do otherwise becomes an exercise in continued domination and oppression. He states that “others cannot do the enlightening for participants; in the end, they are or are not enlightened in their own terms” (p.91).

Furthermore, participation is required because it is through dialogue and communicative action that truth is obtained and knowledge is produced (Kemmis, 2001). Fals-Borda (1991) asserts that his concept of ‘vivencia’ “takes dialogue as its point of insertion in the social process” (p. 149). It is through such dialogue that participants can come to reflect upon their situation, imagine different possibilities and begin to remake their lives in ways that are more in line with their own choosing (Smith et al., 1997). Such dialogue requires constant attention to, and nurturance of, relationship (Stringer, 1999). It requires a remaking of the researcher-researched relationship in ways that are more participatory, mutual and collaborative (Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991) and it requires relationships that recognize and value the contributions that everyone can make to the process.

Thus, when action research discusses participation as a key element in its process (McTaggart, 1997) it is, in essence talking about relationships. It is through participation that its aims are realized. Such participation cannot exist without careful attention to relationships. It is through relationships that

participation is possible (Stringer, 1999), knowledge is generated and validated (Smith, 1997) and liberation is achieved (Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991). Thus it is the quality of the relationships developed, the strength of the connections that are nurtured and the durability of the trust that is achieved that provides the ground on which action research is able to realize its goals (Smith et al., 1997).

### ***Supporting the Learning and Growth of Others***

The importance of supporting the learning and growth of others for both action research and child and youth care should already be clear. Both action research and child and youth care take as central their role in supporting the learning and growth of others. For child and youth care it is about supporting the development of children, youth and families while in action research it is about supporting others in regaining control over their daily existence. For both processes this goal is what shapes them and all other elements are aligned towards its end.

In child and youth care, Bertolino and Thompson (1999) insist that the growth and development of children and youth should be an overriding twenty-four hour a day, seven-day-a-week concern. For Maier (1993), child development is the focus of child and youth care's relationships and interactions. For Anglin (1999) it is definitional. Towards this there is general agreement. The challenge for child and youth care workers, however, is to

maintain a focus on the development of children and youth in the face of increasing pressures and demands.

It is not always easy to be focused on the development of others. Child and youth care workers are regularly asked to intervene in highly charged emotional situations and these situations are difficult for everyone involved (Kass and Mann-Feder, 1995). As Ricks and Garfat (1995) note, child and youth care workers often know what it is that they should do but that being able to do it is another question entirely. Magnuson (1995) observes that it is possible to have programs "that follow all the rules but provide an impoverished human life and repeatedly violate the dignity of children" (p.409). Establishing clearly defined codes of conduct and guides for practice are a beginning: putting them into practice is another.

This is a challenge that child and youth care must continue to strive to address. What has been discussed above is the ideal. I know from my own practice that achieving the ideal requires constant reflection and awareness. Maintaining such reflection and awareness is not easy or effortless. Time pressures, organizational demands, and personal issues constantly threaten to intrude. Habits are developed and routines cry out to be maintained. Yet a focus on the development of the children, youth and families with whom child and youth care workers are fortunate enough to be involved requires that they stay present and keep things clear (Fewster, 1990b), that they give their attention to the minutea of daily interactions within the context of their client's lives (Maier, 1993), and that they strive towards self-awareness as a matter of

'being' (Ricks 1989). This is what it means to be a child and youth care practitioner.

In action research the demands are not dissimilar and the challenges are great. Action research requires that researchers go beyond the collection and analysis of data for their own ends. It demands that instead researchers becomes involved as participants in both their own and other's processes as they work together to make improvements to their social realities. Whether its focus is an individual's practice (McNiff, 2002) or a community's concern (Stringer, 1999), the aim of the research is to 'improve' and 'involve' (Carr and Kemmis, 1986). Such a process requires flexibility and adaptability as its questions are negotiated, its data collection methods are decided, its knowledge is generated and its solutions determined (Smith, 1997).

Remaining focused on the goal of supporting the learning and growth of others is not easy. In bringing an agenda of research into practice, action researchers are bringing with them their own motivations, expectations and desires. Suspending these as they attempt to engage with participants in developing their own process is challenging. Yet if research is to come together with action in a way that supports the learning and growth of others, it is a necessity. It must be a process that is owned by all participants. All participants must come to see how the process can be developed, shaped and influenced through their participation (Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991). For it is through their participation that 'concientization' is developed (Smith et

al., 1997), knowledge is generated (Kemmis, 2001) and meaningful social change is achieved (Fals-Borda, 1997).

These convergences are significant. As child and youth care continues to establish its relevance and to struggle for recognition (Lochhead, 2001) it needs to develop ways for practitioners to contribute to its knowledge base. Traditional research mechanisms are problematic because they make requirements of child and youth care practitioners that are in conflict with their practice. For them, the needs and development of the children, youth and families in their care is primary. This cannot, and should not, be compromised. Child and youth care practitioners require a level of flexibility and adaptability that is in line with the demands of their practice. Practice cannot be adapted to suit the needs of the method of research or much will be lost and many child and youth care practitioners will not respond to the call.

This is not to assert that action research represents an unproblematic ideal. In my final chapters I will offer some reflections on some of the ways that action research has been used in child and youth care to date and some of the challenges that are apparent. However, what I am asserting is that by virtue of the convergences between the values and beliefs of action research and child and youth care, action research offers one possibility for practitioners looking for a way to incorporate research into their practice. The following chapters will explore some of my thoughts on how this might be done.

## **Chapter Eight**

### ***Possibilities in Direct Child and Youth Care Practice***

For Winter and Munn-Giddings (2001), action research can be seen as both a model of inquiry and a model of 'work'. They suggest "it is both reflective practice and practice-based research" (p.5). Interpreted in this way, action research holds the possibility of bridging the gap between research and practice in child and youth care. Research would no longer be the domain of a specialized few, but rather it would become an aspect of practice. It would engage child and youth care practitioners in processes of reflection and inquiry within their work as a matter of course and it would involve children, youth and families alongside practitioners in the generation of knowledge about, and solutions for, the situations they encounter.

One could suggest that this is already what child and youth care practitioners do. As Pence (1990) notes the processes of child and youth care practice and research are quite similar. For Pence, both require engagement in processes of observation, interpretation, planning, implementation, evaluation and communication. In the same way the action research spiral of 'look', 'think', 'act' (Stringer, 1999) or planning, acting, observing, reflecting and replanning etc. (Kemmis and Wilkinson, 1998) can be seen as similar to the process that child and youth care practitioners are engaged in with their clients as they seek to understand what is happening and take steps to support development and growth.

Yet, such an understanding only takes us so far. Child and youth care practice is not 'research' and despite the similarities between the two processes, it is important to continue to make some distinctions between them. Stringer (1999) suggests that 'research' can be understood as "systematic and rigorous inquiry or investigation that enables people to understand the nature of problematic events or phenomena" (p.5).

Greenwood and Levin (1998) suggest that research is an:

investigative activity capable of discovering that the world is not organized as our preconceptions lead us to expect and suggesting alternative ways of understanding it. Scientific research documents both the investigative processes and conclusions arising from them in sufficient detail for other interested parties to be able to evaluate the information and interpretations offered. (p. 69)

In making such distinctions, however, one does not have to divorce research from practice. Rather the distinction serves to illustrate how, while both processes may be similar, research requires more than the usual examination of situations that we find ourselves in (Winter and Munn-Giddings, 2001). In order for it to be capable of "discovering that the world is not organized as our preconceptions lead us to expect" and for it to offer "alternative ways of understanding" (Greenwood and Levin, p.69), research must be 'systematic' and 'rigorous' (Stringer) and it must engage us in "looking at matters critically i.e. from more than one point of view" (Winter and Munn-Giddings, p.12).

Thus, in conceptualizing action research as a model of 'work' as well as 'research,' Winter and Munn-Giddings (2001) are not suggesting that

research and practice can be seen as the same thing. Rather they are suggesting that “action research tries to foster not only a model of research which arises naturally out of our practical experience of work, but a model of work which in itself presents opportunities for critical, constructive reflection” (p. 14). They are interested in the possibilities of action research for creating a ‘culture of inquiry’ in practice settings (p.23) and the ways in which action research “requires (and fosters) a working environment which encourages collaboration and reflection, evaluation and exploration—and a culture which is innovative because it is supportive” (ibid., p. 26).

Thus incorporating research into practice becomes about supporting child and youth care practitioners to become more involved in the processes of reflecting upon and critically examining their work. It is about involving both practitioners and children, youth and families, in the process of deepening their understandings of the situations they find themselves in so that they can generate their own solutions and control over such situations. The convergences between action research and child and youth care practice make it possible for action research to complement child and youth care practice in ways that not only enhance child and youth care work but which also support child and youth care practitioners and their clients in contributing to the further development of the field through the knowledge that they generate and the solutions that they create.

As Winter and Munn-Giddings (2001) suggest, work:

always offers scope for ‘research’ in the sense of subjecting our decisions, our relationships, our knowledge base and our

interpretations of 'the evidence' to a more than usual sustained examination . . . So research (and action research in particular) does not need to be thought of as an interruption of work, but as a means for furthering the work we are already engaged in. (p.12)

As child and youth care practitioners, such work includes the daily interactions with children, youth and families (direct practice), the development, implementation and organization of programs and agencies within which child and youth care practice occurs (program and agency practice) and the linkages between practitioners, programs and agencies that make up our communities responses to the challenges that we face (community and interagency practice). Action research provides a means for incorporating research into such practices in a way that is respectful and responsive to the needs of those whom these practices serve. Rather than a disruption of work it can be seen as a process which deepens and strengthens child and youth care practice by providing a way in which practitioners can engage in collaborative reflection on and ongoing development within their practice.

The rest of this chapter seeks to explore how action research might be able to make such contributions in child and youth care practice. Using different models of action research, suggestions will be made for how action research can be incorporated within our direct practice. Subsequent chapters will examine how other models of action research can contribute to program and agency practice and to community and interagency practice within child and youth care.

### ***Practitioner Action Research***

Jean McNiff's (2002) *Action Research: Principles and Practice* explicitly locates action research within professional practice and the individual choices that practitioners make in carrying out their practices. McNiff writes from the perspective of an educator but she claims her ideas about action research are applicable to professional practice situations that involve other people such as the caring professions, management and organizations. For McNiff action research is "a way of researching one's own practice and generating personal theories of practice which show the process of self-monitoring, evaluation of practice and purposeful action to improve the practice for social benefit" (p.21). Furthermore, she states:

When people undertake action research they aim to improve their work, and because their work is always work with others, the implication is that they are improving their understanding of how better to live with others so that all participants in the process can grow.  
(p.53)

It is a model of reflective practice (Schon, 1983) that challenges reified, propositional forms of knowledge and seeks instead to embrace a dialogical, generative, and transformational view of knowledge. From this view she has "come to see action research not as a set of concrete steps but as a process of learning from experience, a dialectical interplay between practice, reflection and learning" (McNiff: p. 14). Action research, in this view becomes a form of 'lived practice' that is embodied in the actions of practitioners as they focus on

examining their own values and whether or not such values are borne out in practice.

She begins from the belief that reality is a process of constant evolution and that knowledge is never static, complete or fixed. In this view:

There are no fixed answers, because answers would immediately become obsolete in a constantly changing future. The very idea of answers is meaningless; answers transform into new questions. Life is a process of asking questions to reveal new potentialities. (p. 18)

Additionally, it a view where:

Individual people are recognized as autonomous agents capable of infinite self-transformation who are working together as collectives of similarly capable autonomous agents, not out of a wish for consensus (which is frequently as source of unfreedom) but out of a sense of responsible, committed action to make the kind of society in which they would wish to live. (p. 138)

McNiff embraces the multiple perspectives that exist in each person's experience of the world and seeks to support each individual's ability to come to know and understand their world.

Drawing from Noam Chomsky, McNiff (2002) distinguishes between E-theories and I-theories. E-theories represent propositional forms of knowledge that situate knowledge as an external object disconnected in place and time and I-theories represent a dialogical form of knowing that is situated within an individuals belief system at a specific point in time. She challenges E-theories on the basis that they suggest that knowledge somehow exists

separate from the individuals and the contexts in which it was created. Such views are problematic for reasons already discussed in chapter six and because they suggest that knowledge can be fixed when, in her view, such is impossible.

Action research as a form of inquiry, then, becomes concerned with the generation of I-theories of knowledge. From this position “theory is not the product of a process of critical discernment but is itself a process of critical discernment” (McNiff, 2002, p. 139) and “knowing becomes a holistic practice: the boundaries between theory and practice dissolve and fade away, because theory is lived in practice and practice becomes a form of living theory” (ibid., p.36). This places the individual at the center of the inquiry. It requires that the individual explore the ways in which they have come to understand their practice and whether or not such understandings are borne out in the ways that they act. The basic action research process consists in reviewing our practice, identifying an aspect we wish to improve, conceptualizing a way forward, trying it out, evaluating what happens, modifying our plan in light of what happens, trying it out again and so forth until we are satisfied with that aspect of our work.

Consistent with the notion that action research is research “with” rather than research “on” others (Heron and Reason, 2001), McNiff (2002) argues that “the focus of the research is you, in company with others” (p.89). Action research necessarily involves others in the process of inquiry into practice as practices exist in relation to others and are focused on supporting others in

their own growth processes. In seeking to improve our own practices we are seeking to improve the ways in which we are supporting others. Other's become involved as research participants, as observers, as validators and as potential researchers themselves.

Data is collected through reflective diaries, interviews and discussions and ostensive techniques such as audiotape and videotape. Individuals monitor their own practices by examining their actions and the impact that those actions have on other individuals. Data is analysed by the individual investigating their own practice and presented for review to participants, critical friends, and a validation group. In order to claim that one has improved their practice through action research one must be able to show how their practice was, how it changed and how that change represented an improvement over existing practices. McNiff (2002) requires that current practices are critically examined, that multiple perspectives are explored and that evidence is generated to support claims of knowledge and improvement.

Validation occurs through self-validation, critical friends and a validation group. It is not enough that an individual claims to have generated knowledge and improved practice to consider the process research. Rather, McNiff (2002) argues, action research comes to be seen as a disciplined inquiry when a practitioner can show how they systematically investigated how to improve their practice and can produce evidence for the critical scrutiny of others that shows how the practice can be judged to be improved.

Validation is not sought in relation to conformity with traditional research reporting conventions but rather by the extent to which the action research demonstrates critical reflection on practice and provides evidence to support claims of the generation of new knowledge that has improved and developed practice for social benefit.

This approach to action research contributes to wider social change by concentrating first on personal change. McNiff (2002) argues that we cannot control what others chose to do but we can influence them through our own practices. Moreover, by sharing what we have learned with others we can also influence them to examine and explore their own practices. She acknowledges that the process is slow and arduous but also argues that together, individual improvements, constant striving to learn and ongoing development within practice can come together with other's attempts to create real, meaningful and lasting change. She further states that "by sharing our practice, critiquing and learning from one another, I believe we are developing new forms of educational theory which are squarely rooted in the experienced reality of people's lives" (McNiff, p. 147). From this view, action researchers can collectively contribute to a better understanding of practice and can contribute to improvements and developments in knowledge, theory and practice through individual's accounts of their processes of learning, growth and change.

### ***Critical Action Research***

Critical action research is similarly committed to investigating, critiquing and improving practice (Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Kemmis, 2001; Kemmis and Wilkinson, 1998). This form of action research has been referred to as critical action research, emancipatory action research and participatory action research. Kemmis (2001) uses each term freely. I note this because Kemmis' use of different terms to refer to the same approach can be confusing and needs to be understood as a reflection of his approach rather than as representative of others' use of the terms—particularly that of 'participatory action research' as used by Fals-Borda and Rahman (1991) and Smith (1997) discussed below.

This approach to action research differs from McNiff's (2002) account in that it is not grounded as exclusively within individual's practices. Rather it is focused on the ways in which professional practices are constituted in and by the discourses of those practices. This view of action research is strongly influenced by the critical theory of Jurgen Habermas. Kemmis (2001) argues that Habermas locates truth and knowledge in discourse rather than in a subject or object. In this view, truth can only "emerge in settings where all assertions are equally open to critical scrutiny, without fear or favour" (p. 93) and knowledge can be validated by questioning whether a statement is comprehensible, accurate (true), sincerely stated and appropriate for the situation in which it was made. Furthermore, Kemmis asserts, Habermas'

theory of communicative action and theory of system and lifeworlds ask us to consider how the systems (organizations and institutions) we work within are created, shaped, and sustained, by the values, beliefs, assumptions and interactions within those systems and by the lifeworlds (cultural, social and personal) in which they operate.

Action research in this context becomes a process through which we can raise our awareness of how our systems and lifeworlds are constituted and reconstituted within our daily practices (Kemmis, 2001). Its aim is to open up a communicative space for participants to engage in a dialogue towards both a critical understanding of their practices and the ways in which these practices can be transformed. Carr and Kemmis (1986) state that action research is:

a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out. (p. 162)

It embraces critical theory's interest in "emancipating people from determination by habit, custom, illusion and coercion" (Kemmis, 2001, p. 92) and asserts that:

through the commitment to rational communication, just and democratic decision making and access to an interesting and satisfying life for all, self-critical communities of action researchers can establish conditions for social change. (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p. 197)

Through the creation of an arena for dialogue where all views are critically assessed without fear or favour, truth and knowledge can emerge in a way that makes possible the organization of future action undistorted by unexamined habits, customs, ideologies, histories and beliefs (Carr and Kemmis).

Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998) suggest that “in particular, participatory action research attempts to help people investigate and change their social and educational realities by changing some of the practices which constitute their lived realities” (p. 21). They adopt the Lewian spiral of steps in characterizing action research as a spiral of self reflective cycles of planning, acting, observing, reflecting, re-planning and so forth. They identify it as a ‘social’ process that is ‘participatory,’ ‘practical and collaborative,’ ‘emancipatory,’ ‘critical’ and ‘recursive.’ They stress that it concerns actual, as opposed to abstract, practices and that it “involves learning about the real, material, concrete, particular practices of particular people in particular places” (Kemmis and Wilkinson, p. 24). The aim of critical action research is to investigate how people’s practices are shaped by “particular material, social and historical circumstances” so that they “become accessible to reflection, discussion and reconstruction” and are able to be “modified in and for present and future circumstances” (ibid., p. 25).

In order to achieve this, Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998) suggest that we need to view practice dialectically. They argue that traditional investigations of practice tend to see practice in one of four ways. Practice is seen as 1) the

individual performances as viewed by an outsider; 2) the social and material conditions that constitute practice as viewed by an outsider; 3) the “intentions, meanings and values which constitute practice” as viewed from a subjective, internal perspective; or 4) the “language, discourses and traditions which constitute practice” as viewed by the subjective internal perspectives of participants in the discourse community (pp. 26-27). Kemmis and Wilkinson argue that the ‘individual vs. social’ and ‘objective vs. subjective’ present false dichotomies and that instead all four aspects need to be viewed together as mutually constitutive aspects of each other.

For Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998), then, action research must involve itself in exploring all four perspectives in its investigation of practice.

Participants must join together with other practitioners in a critical community for the purposes of exploring how their particular practices are shaped by their current understandings and actions and by the social structures and discourses that they are embedded within. Participants must create the communicative space in which their understandings can be examined critically with an eye towards reconstituting these understandings in ways which lead to an improvement in practice.

The process requires that participants join together in order to introduce multiple perspectives into the process and to support the identification of ways in which particular understandings and practices may be distorted. Carr and Kemmis (1986) note that:

Understanding the nature and consequences of social action require understanding the perspective of others involved and affected by the

action. Action research therefore precipitates collaborative involvement in the research process, in which the research process is extended towards including all those involved in, or affected by, the action. (p.199)

Individuals are engaged in exploring their practices within a critical community of others who share a concern with and are affected by the same practices. Knowledge is generated in the process of reflection, planning, acting, and observing together with others and its validity is created in the process of a free and open dialogue about the discourse and circumstances that have been constitutive of and constituted by the practices in question.

The value of this process as research is furthered through its emancipatory goals. Its concern is not with validity and generalizability in the traditional vein, rather its concern is with the extent to which it can transform situations to “overcome felt dissatisfactions, alienation, ideological distortion and the injustices of oppression and domination” (Kemmis, 2001, p.92). It succeeds at being emancipatory when it increases our awareness of the forces that shape and are shaped by our lives and when it creates an opportunity for us to more consciously choose how we wish to participate in this process. It is concerned more with the process of research and action than with the products (reports) of the process. Its accounts are provided not as a definitive body of knowledge to be replicated by others and generalized to other contexts, but as a contribution to the wider dialogue on practices contained in the communicative space between other practitioners and researchers (ibid.).

### ***Direct Child and Youth Care Practice***

Anglin (2002b) suggests that “much of the good practice exhibited by child and youth care workers is the result of . . . tacit knowing” (p. 25). That is, while child and youth care workers may not be able to articulate or may not necessarily be aware of the theoretical basis for their practice, they are able nevertheless to engage in good practice. Anglin compares such knowing to that of an artist or a craftsperson who while they can produce a remarkable crafted piece of art, cannot necessarily explain to someone how they did it. Such conceptualizations of child and youth care practice are not new (Eisikovits and Beker, 1983).

Such observations are also consistent with Schon’s (1983) work describing the ‘knowledge-in action’ and ‘reflection-in-action’ of skilful professionals engaged in practice. Schon states:

The workaday life of the professional depends on tacit knowing-in-action. Every competent practitioner can recognize phenomena -- families of symptoms associated with a particular disease, peculiarities of a certain building site, irregularities of materials or structures—for which he cannot give a reasonably accurate or complete description. In his day-to-day practice he makes innumerable judgements for quality for which he cannot give a reasonably accurate criteria, and he displays skills for which he cannot state the rules and procedures.  
(p.49)

Reflection-in-action goes hand in hand with this knowledge-in-action. Schon suggests that it is the “process of reflection-in-action which is central to the

'art' by which practitioners deal well with situations of uncertainty, instability, and value conflict" (p. 50). Thus while both processes are often tacit, the practitioner uses both knowledge and reflection as they take steps to respond, reflect and adapt in their practices to the particular needs of the situation they encounter.

Such a view, according to Schon (1983), requires that we 'recast' the relationship between research and practice. He states:

For on this perspective, research is an activity of practitioners. It is triggered by the features of the practice situation, undertaken on the spot and immediately linked to action . . . Here the exchange between research and practice is immediate, and reflection-in-action is its own implementation. (p. 309)

Yet, Schon also recognizes that tacit knowing-in-action and reflection-in-action are themselves not sufficient. He acknowledges that "at any given time in the life of a profession, certain ways of framing problems and roles come into good currency" (p.309) and that such frames need to be made explicit so that they are also reflected upon and alternatives can be explored. He argues that when left implicit these frames will constrain professional practice in ways that practitioners are not aware. Thus, he suggests that reflective practitioners can also benefit from engaging in additional research both into the ways in which they use knowledge and reflection-in-action and the ways in which they frame problems and roles.

As child and youth care practitioners, then, we need to become more involved in examining our direct practices. It may be that much of our good

practice is the result of tacit knowing (Anglin, 2002) but for the field to benefit from such knowing and for such knowing to progress, we must take steps to make that knowing explicit so that it can be shared and opened up to critical examination by both ourselves and others. McNiff's (2002) approach to action research offers a way in which child and youth care practitioners could engage in more systematic reflection within their practice. By placing the individual practitioner at the centre of the research, McNiff's approach to action research is concerned with providing a platform through which practitioners can explore how their values and beliefs are, or are not, being realized in practice and can explore ways in which their practices may be improved.

McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead (1996) provide a good description of how the process works. They remind practitioners that such an approach is concerned with both action and research. It is concerned with examining ways in which practices are conducted with an eye towards taking steps towards making improvements in those practices. It requires that practitioners articulate certain aspects of their practices, examine them critically, and implement changes in practice that result in improvements over their current practices. The individual practitioner is at the centre of the process. The practitioner is required to take responsibility for the choices they are making and the actions that they initiate.

The process becomes research as practitioners engage in systematic inquiry into their own practices. It requires rigorous processes for the

collection and analysis of data and it requires that both the processes used and the conclusions drawn are made public in ways that open them up for examination and scrutiny by others. McNiff et al. (1996) state that:

The whole point of researching is to find out something that we did not already know. In this sense all research is a contribution to our own knowledge. We think that making a public claim to knowledge is more than contributing to personal knowledge. It implies that we have something relevant to say that others in the public arena will find useful and that we have convincing evidence to support what we claim to know. (p. 10)

Thus this form of action research is concerned with improving individual practices by engaging practitioners in the systematic reflection on their practices, the collection and analysis of data on both their current practices and the changes they implement and the sharing of this work with others in order to open it up for further examination and scrutiny. It is a collaborative process in that the research-practitioner must consult with others in collecting data about their own practices and must open up the process to the scrutiny of others in order to challenge any interpretation being made and to validate any conclusions being drawn.

In child and youth care practice this is a process that individual child and youth care practitioners could use in examining and improving their own work. It is a process that requires that practitioners remain focused on examining their own actions and the effects of those actions. It gives children, youth and families direct input and influence over the process because it requires practitioners to consult with their clients in generating data

about practice and in validating any claims to knowledge and improvement that are made. The process of making these subsequent claims public makes contributions to the knowledge base of the field and offers other practitioners exemplars of practice which can then contribute to their own process of professional and practice development.

Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998) adopt a different approach. Their approach is directed at bringing a group of stakeholders together in order to examine an aspect of practice they wish to improve. It is not a process conducted by individuals, rather it is conducted within a group that shares a thematic concern about their shared practices (Kemmis and McTaggart, (1988). Furthermore, Kemmis and Wilkinson focus is not so much on the ways in which individual practices are realized as in McNiff (2002), rather they see action research as a:

Learning process whose fruits are the real and material changes in:

- What people do
- How they interact with the world and with others
- What they mean and what they value, and
- The discourses in which they understand and interpret their world. (p.25)

They see action research as a process through which practitioners can come to better understand their practices by locating them “as concretely and precisely as possible in the particular material, social and historical circumstances” (p.25) of those practices.

Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998) are interested in the ways in which language, discourse and power both shape and are shaped by the knowledge claims that we make and the practices that are borne from such claims. Action research, then is a process that explore how these features influence the aspect of practice that we are exploring so that these aspects become accessible for “reflection, discussion and reconstruction as products of past circumstances which are capable of being modified in and for present and future circumstances” (p. 25).

Kemmis and McTaggart (1998) offer a useful guide to how this process works. In their process a group is formed around a shared thematic concern. In this action research group, individuals come together to critically explore the ways in which their language, activities and social relationships give shape to their practices and the thematic concern that they share. They are clear that “*Action research is not individualistic*” (emphasis in original, p.15) and that the group is a key part of the process of critical reflection on practice. However, they also state that “while the group is the focus of action research as an activity, individuals are committed to changes in their own personal practice as a means of advancing the collective interest of the group” (p.16). Thus the group is the place where the focus of the research is determined, data is explored, critiques are developed and alternatives are established. Individual’s practices become the source of the data and the location for action to be taken and the results to be observed.

For child and youth care practitioners this offers a way into exploring their shared practices within a group of concerned stakeholders. It offers a way of supporting practitioners in examining how their particular practices have been constructed so that their practices can be reflected upon and reconstructed in ways that better support the people that they serve. Unlike McNiff's (2002) process that is undertaken by an individual practitioner examining how their practice is realized and how it can be improved, this process (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988; Kemmis and Wilkinson, 1998) is about a group coming together to explore a shared thematic concern about practice so that they can reconstruct that practice in ways that are better suited for their current situations. It is a process that would engage child and youth care practitioners in the critical reflection on both their individual practices and on the ways in which those practices have been shaped by the social, political, economic and historical forces of their particular situation. Direct practice would be improved as tacit understandings and assumptions are opened up for reflection, scrutiny, discussion and reconstruction. Furthermore, it offers a way for child and youth care practitioners to join with other stakeholders in a larger discussion about the ways in which their practices are constituted and enacted. Such discussions would both value the lessons learned by child and youth care practitioners, their colleagues, their clients, and their communities as they work together to improve the situations that they find themselves in.

Both approaches to action research present some ways in which research can be conducted within child and youth care practice by child and youth care practitioners. McNiff's (2001) approach focuses the practitioner on examining their individual practices in the company of others who have been impacted by and/or observed those practices. It challenges practitioners to examine the ways in which their values are or are not being realized in practice and invites the practitioner to take steps to make improvements within their practice. Critical action research encourages practitioners to join together with other practitioners and stakeholders to examine the discourses that have given shape to their practices. It seeks to involve practitioners in examining their work and to improve their practices by reconstituting them in ways which are more in line with what they are trying to accomplish.

## ***Chapter Nine***

### ***Possibilities in Child and Youth Care***

#### ***Program, Agency and Community Practice***

Kemmis and McTaggart's approach (1988) also offers a way for child and youth care practitioners to join together with their colleagues and clients to examine their program, agency and community child and youth care practices. Most child and youth care practice is conducted as part of a program or agency mandate and these programs and agencies have a significant impact on the ways in which that practice is constituted. Over time, the assumptions, routines and practices of these organizations can become reified. The program and agencies rules become embedded in both the understandings of practitioners and the actions they take. These rules define both the way things are and the way things are done. Practitioners forget that program developers constructed these rules and allow the rules take on a life of their own.

By joining together in a group with stakeholders from the same program or agency, child and youth care practitioners can use Kemmis and McTaggart's (1988) guide as a way of exploring and improving the practices within their programs. They are encouraged to re-examine the ways in which historical social, economic and political forces have shaped their discourses and practices. The process expects that through such exploration, reifications can be exposed and practices can be reconstructed in ways that

are more appropriate for the current time and place. Used in such a way it moves the focus from individual, direct practice and begins to examine the organizations and institutions in which our practices are often contained.

On a community level, critical action research encourages practitioners and stakeholders from different agencies within a community to come together to examine their community practices. In an era of shrinking program funding and increasing community need, agencies increasingly will need to work together to examine the needs of the community and the ways in which they can work together to meet these needs. Kemmis and McTaggart's (1988) approach can contribute to strengthening community child and youth care practices by encouraging various practitioners within a community to examine, critique and improve their practices in ways that better reflect the community's needs.

Yet, other action research approaches are also relevant here. There are a number of approaches that seek to support research, improvement and change at an organizational and community level. As already apparent with practitioner and critical action research approaches, each action research approach brings with it its own assumptions and biases that direct the ways in which it engages in the research context. These differences provide options so that the needs of the group and interests of the participants can determine the approach and focus that they will take. This becomes increasingly important as the research questions broaden to include wider community interests and concerns. Bringing any group together can be challenging and

the success of action research with its participatory focus is significantly dependent upon the ability of a group of people with divergent interests and perspectives to come together to explore an issue of common concern. This chapter will present some of these models and then examine the ways in which they might be used within child and youth care practice.

### ***Organizational and Community Based Action Research***

Greenwood and Levin (1998; 2001) and Stringer (1999) have a more functional approach to action research. While both approaches draw from different theoretical foundations, they each see action research as a situation where researchers facilitate a local group's investigation of an issue of mutual concern and assist them in generating solutions to that problem as part of the process. It is not about the generation of I-theories of practice as in McNiff (2002) and it is not necessarily about "studying, reframing and reconstructing practices" (Kemmis and Wilkinson, 1998, p. 22) as in critical action research. Rather it is a process in which an outside researcher joins with a group of local participants in an attempt to support them in the resolution of a problem of mutual concern.

Greenwood and Levin (1998) state "action research is social research carried out by a team encompassing a professional action researcher and members of an organization or community seeking to improve their situation" (p.4). Stringer (1999) states:

In community-based action research, the role of the researcher is not that of an expert who does research but that of a resource person. He

or she becomes a facilitator or consultant who acts as a catalyst to assist stakeholders in defining their problems clearly and to support them as they work toward effective solutions to the issues that concern them. (p. 25)

These two approaches represent a departure from the previous approaches in that they are focused on utilizing the action research process within organizations and communities rather than as an investigation of individual practices.

Greenwood and Levin's (1998) pragmatic action research finds its foundations in general system's theory (GST) and pragmatic philosophy.

They state:

In GST, the units of analysis are systems, not individuals. . . the world is a complex, interacting array of systems and system processes, bumping into each other in a variety of ways. The only hope of understanding any particular thing is by placing it in the appropriate system context and following the processes by which it acts. (p.70)

They adopt John Dewey's pragmatic views about the impossibility of separating thought from action and about democracy as an "ongoing, collective process of social improvement in which all levels of society had to participate" (Greenwood and Levin, p. 72). Their focus is not on the creation of 'mutual understanding and consensus' but on embracing the "diversity of experience and capacities within the local group as an opportunity for the enrichment of the research-action process" (p. 75). The success of the action research process is judged in terms of its ability to produce real solutions to

real problems and its ability to increase participants' control over their own lives.

For Greenwood and Levin (1998; 2001) action research is a process of inquiry where researchers and participants cogenerate knowledge through the mutual contribution of their particular skill, ability, and knowledge. They state that the:

local knowledge, historical consciousness and everyday experience of the insiders complements the outsiders' skills in facilitating learning processes, technical skills in research procedures and comparative knowledge of the subject under investigation. (Greenwood and Levin, 1998, p. 77)

They accept that the knowledge produced is context bound and argue that the only way research can generate real solutions to real life problems is through such a process. In order to be successful the process must be determined by what the participants consider important and by what affects their daily lives. Its value as research is in its pragmatic ability to solve the problem at hand and the contributions it can make to others learning processes by being sufficiently clear about its own problems, contexts, solutions and outcomes so that they can be critically explored by others.

Greenwood and Levin (1998) see action research as a way of "keeping the conversation going" (p. 86). The process is:

constituted by a series of communicative actions that take place in the dialogical environments created by communities or other organizations for the purpose of the cogeneration of new knowledge, the

development and implementation of plans of action and the democratization of society. (p. 90)

They remain open to any social research technique whether they be surveys, statistical analysis, interviews, focus groups, life histories or others, provided that the reasons for using them has been agreed upon by all research collaborators and provided that “they are used in a way that does not oppress the participants” (p.7). They are adamant that “knowledge emerges and is evaluated through actions or as a consequence of actions” (p. 79) and offer a ‘search conference’ process as a way to begin.

Stringer (1999) on the other hand, locates his approach to action research explicitly within the methodological frameworks of Guba and Lincoln’s fourth-generation evaluation (see Stringer, 1999). He states that:

Community-based action research is a collaborative approach to inquiry or investigation that provides people with the means to take systematic action to resolve specific problems. This approach favours consensual and participatory procedures that enable people (a) to investigate systematically their problems and issues, (b) to formulate powerful and sophisticated accounts of their situations, and (c) to devise plans to deal with the problem at hand. (p.17)

He sees it as a process that is ‘democratic,’ ‘equitable,’ ‘liberating’ and ‘life enhancing.’ He conceptualizes the basic action research routine as ‘look, think, act’ and encourages participants to focus “on methods and techniques of inquiry that take into account people’s history, culture, interactional practices and emotional lives” (Stringer: p. 17).

For Stringer (1999) the action research process is constituted in cooperative relationships, effective communication, active participation and broad inclusion. For the process to work relationships must be equal, harmonious, accepting, cooperative and sensitive. Communication must be attentive, accepting, comprehensible, truthful, sincere, and appropriate. Participation must be involving, active, supportive, successful and personal. And, inclusion must account for all individuals, all groups, all issues and be cooperative and beneficial for everyone concerned.

Action research commences as researchers/facilitators familiarize themselves with the context. In this stage, Stringer (1999) argues that researchers should establish contact, identify stakeholder groups, identify key people, negotiate the researcher's role and build a preliminary picture of the context. Following this the researcher works with stakeholder groups to gather, record and analyze information. Participants work together to construct a mutual understanding of the context and issues at hand that can be detailed in a report for further communication and consideration.

In the next stage the researcher works with participants to extend and clarify their understanding through the use of interpretative techniques. Through processes such as interpretive questions, organizational review, concept mapping, problem analysis, group processes and extended consultation, participants are encouraged to examine their understandings of the context and issues and to consider them from as broad a perspective as possible. From this process participants begin to identify priorities for action

and to construct joint reports for further communication and consultation. The final step in the action research process as conceptualized by Stringer is to formulate and enact solutions to the problems that have been the focus of the research. In this stage participants plan, implement and evaluate their solutions generated from the previous processes of examining the problem.

The value of action research for Stringer (1999) is in its ability to bring people together to investigate and solve problems of local concern. It:

suggests the possibility of more socially responsive uses of research, providing the means for people to have a more direct impact on the significant issues that continue to detract from their social life and to make a tangible difference to the problems that diminish their lives.  
(p.210-211)

In so much as it remains an interpretive approach to research, the quality of the research it conducts can be evaluated by the same standards as other interpretive methodologies. But in so far as it goes one step further in taking action, it is successful as action research when it is able to make a specific difference in the lives of its participants and it has failed when it does not.

### ***Participatory Action Research***

Fals-Borda and Rahman (1991) and Smith et al. (1997) present an approach to participatory action research (PAR) that is focused on supporting marginalized and oppressed peoples in regaining more control in their lives. Their approach retains some distinct differences to Kemmis' (2001) approach which sometimes uses the same name. This approach is not focused on

individual or professional practices but is rather more specifically concerned with empowering groups of people to liberate themselves from the oppressive features of their lived reality. This approach to action research has stringent participation demands and clearly expects that the 'external' agent in the process does not take a dominant role. It is not about researchers exploring their practices nor is it about an external researcher facilitating a defined process. It is about engaging with locals as equal participants in a process which supports them to make changes that they desire. It is not about showing them how to do things but is instead about walking alongside them as they discover how to do things for themselves.

Rahman (1991) states that:

The basic ideology of PAR is that a self-conscious people, those who are currently poor and oppressed, will progressively transform their environment by their own praxis. In this process others may play a catalytic and supportive role but will not dominate. (p.13)

This view posits action research as a process of engaging with others in order to assist them in their own processes of liberation and empowerment. It is a process that values local and popular knowledge (Fals-Borda, 1991) and one which believes in everyone's ability to generate knowledge and solutions to their own problems. It is a process that believes that:

The rediscovery of personal and social histories, reexamination of realities and regaining of power through deliberate actions leads to the discovery of knowledge that can nurture, empower and liberate persons and groups to achieve a more human and equitable world. (Willms, 1997, p. 8)

It recognizes and critiques the role of power in human relationships and within research processes and aims to replace the power-over relationships that characterize people's daily lives with power-with and power-from-within relationships (Smith, 1997).

The process of this form of action research is necessarily dynamic, changing and open-ended. It recognizes that transformation processes are never completed and it retains a deliberate ambiguity in order to be responsive to the needs of the people involved (Smith, 1997). It draws its foundations from Paulo Freire's concept of conscientization and Fals-Borda's concept of vivencia (Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991; Smith, 1997). According to these concepts liberation occurs when people achieve a critical consciousness through an "unveiling of the world of oppression" and the "expulsion of the myths created and developed by the old order" (Smith, 1997). Through both a deepening awareness of forces that give shape to our lives and our ability to transform them, conscientization arises and people are able to regain some power and control their lives. The process requires commitment and active participation by all those involved. It is a 'lived experience' or 'vivencia' for Fals-Borda's (1997). One cannot liberate another but rather one must achieve liberation on their own terms and through their own process.

Smith (1997) presents a 'praxiology' framework for understanding this process of action research. She argues that: "a PAR process consists of spiralling moments. Each present moment incorporates the past and circles

around into the future" (p. 197). The process itself is one of 'knowing self,' 'seeking connections,' 'grounding in context,' and 'beginning praxis.'

Liberation exists in the process itself as people investigate their realities, obtain information and understand that information, learn adequate skills to do their work well, participate actively in decision making, critically analyze their own situations, obtain enough resources to take action and develop enough inner power to risk action (Smith, 1997).

In the process research questions are not predetermined but rather they emerge in the process of coming together and deciding where to start. As external agents in the process, facilitators need to "begin where the people are at and move along with them," " get guidance" and "assist the group to identify internal facilitators" (Smith, 1997, p.235). Data collection methods or techniques include:

Oral histories, interviews, group discussion, community surveys, community mapping and drawings, video productions, popular theatre, dramas, community radio, role-playing, dancing, brainstorming, feasibility studies, public meetings, open-ended surveys, fact finding tours, exchange visits, songs and story-narratives. (Smith, p. 211)

Participants themselves get to decide what information is relevant and credible and by doing so give social validation to the content.

Fals-Borda (1991) suggests that in PAR "information can be immediately processed, confronted and verified by motivated and fully-aware participants" (p. 150). Knowledge is generated by the group itself and it is validated within the group that generated it. Smith (1997) suggests that the

process of validation in action research is “participatory and has to do with the question of value: what value do participants place on their work?” (p. 245). Park (1993) argues that “critical knowledge validates itself in creating a vehicle of transformation and in overcoming obstacles to emancipation—both internally and with respect to the external world” (quoted in Smith, 1997: p. 245). This does not mean that relativism reigns supreme, rather it means that the validity of the knowledge generated within a particular action research group is validated by its ability to enable the participants to achieve their own liberation.

This is a challenging and demanding approach to action research. Researchers cannot arrive in a community with a preconceived idea about how to conduct research or with a preconceived notion of what needs to be done. Instead researchers must involve themselves in the community and join with local participants in a process of mutual exploration, discovery and action. Relationships must be nurtured and developed; trust must be earned. It requires commitment, sustained effort, respectful and supportive relationships and flexible timelines. It is a process of research that requires a focus on the process itself for it is within the process that its aims are realized. Liberation comes through supporting others in their own process rather than imposing one from outside and to truly be effective external agents must work from the very beginning to make themselves and their skills obsolete.

***Program and Agency Child and Youth Care Practice***

Greenwood and Levin's (1998) approach to action research is particularly relevant for child and youth care practitioners as they are called upon to provide evidence for the effectiveness of their practice. Increasingly funding bodies are requiring that programs and organizations engage in evidence-based and outcome-oriented practice. For child and youth care practitioners this means that they must be able to justify their practices in terms of the effects that it has and the outcomes that it produces. Such justifications require that practitioners engage in research on their practices in ways that can show both the reasons for the decisions that they have made and the ways that these decisions have led to improvements in the situations in which they were used.

Greenwood and Levin's (1998) approach seeks to involve all the stakeholders in the problem to join together in defining the situation at hand, exploring the features of the problem being experienced and working together at developing solutions based upon the understanding developed. It recognizes that the problems are context bound and that the solutions, accordingly, are going to be context driven. It encourages stakeholders to work together at collecting and analyzing data about the situation as they collaborate on developing and implementing solutions based on their findings. The process cycles through action research's spiral of reflection and action as hypotheses are generated, action is taken, and results are evaluated for the

effects they have on the problem. The process continues until solutions are developed that are effective at addressing the problem encountered and evidence is generated that can be used to substantiate that effectiveness.

Such a process could support child and youth care workers from the same program or agency in creating a 'culture of inquiry' (Winter and Munn-Giddings, 2001) within their practice that strengthens and improves their collective work. Used in this way the action research process encourages participants to become clearer about what their program is trying to accomplish and the ways in which it is attempting to meet its mandate. It further requires them to engage in the collection of data from a variety of perspectives on what is being done, the effects that it is having and gaps in its processes. It asks all participants to examine both what is working and what is not with an eye towards developing their knowledge about the ways in which things can be strengthened and improved. Most importantly the process demands broad participation from a diverse group of stakeholders. The process requires child and youth care practitioners to hear from the people that they serve about the ways in which their programs are experienced and it demands that these people are given a voice in the ways in which the program is developed and refined.

For child and youth care practitioners, the attractiveness of Greenwood and Levin's (1998) approach is in its compatibility with child and youth care practice. The problem definition, data collecting strategies, analysis and solution generation is done collaboratively with stakeholders in the problem

situation. Control is retained by the stakeholders as a group which allows the process to be driven by the needs of that group as opposed to the methodology being employed, or the strategies being used. This is important in child and youth care practice because that practice is grounded in the context of those being served and realized in the relationships that are created between the child and youth care practitioner and their clients. It is the needs of the children, youth and families being served that are at the center of child and youth care practice and any research done in that practice needs to serve those needs rather than its own. Greenwood and Levin's approach offers such flexibility and control to the owners of the problem being investigated. Furthermore it is not content simply to describe or explain, rather it is driven to develop credible and workable solutions as part of the process in ways that are compatible with child and youth care practitioners same concerns.

Furthermore, Greenwood and Levin (1998) are clear that their process requires systematic attention to data collection and analysis. They require that the process be documented in sufficient detail that it can be opened up to the scrutiny and reflection of others. It is a process that is concerned with producing evidence for the conclusions that it has drawn and explaining the processes used in sufficient detail so that others can also understand the decisions made and their impact on the local situation. It is not a process that is concerned with generalizability and replication in the traditional vein but it is concerned that the processes used and the conclusions drawn are sufficiently

explained so that the knowledge generated can be considered for its implications in other situations. In this way the process should be able to support child and youth care practitioners in both producing evidence for the basis and outcomes of their practice that they are increasingly being asked to provide and supporting them in contributing to the knowledge base of child and youth care practice by being able to articulate and share their particular experiences in working together with others to address the problems that they face

### ***Community and Interagency Child and Youth Care Practice***

Currently, in British Columbia, the Ministry of Children and Family Development is making the transition to community governance. Communities are being asked to take on a more central role in the development, provision and evaluation of services. Agencies are being asked to participate in a process called *Integrated Case Management* (Ministry for Children and Families, 1999) which requires them to practice in more collaborative ways. As communities struggle with these transitions there is an opportunity for child and youth care practitioners to become involved in developing, supporting and improving the services for children and youth in their communities. It is necessarily a participatory and collaborative process that can make use of the successes of action research in similar contexts and endeavours.

Greenwood and Levin's (1998) approach is one example of how this might be done. It has been discussed above as a process for practitioners and stakeholders within a program or agency to come together to address a specific problem or concern. It can equally be applied to group of practitioners from different agencies and community stakeholders coming together to address a shared issue of concern in their community. The process would be the same as described above but would require that the action research group be comprised of community stakeholders working together to develop community specific solutions as opposed to agency or program specific ones.

Similarly, Stringer (1999) describes an approach to community based action research. This approach differs from Greenwood and Levin (1998) in that it is geared towards addressing community issues and is based on constructivist as opposed to pragmatic philosophies. The process of Stringer's approach has been described earlier in this chapter and is more fully described in his book *Action Research (Second Edition)*. For Stringer this approach is particularly useful in bringing together a diverse group of community members and engaging them in an exploration of a shared concern and the development of local solutions to that shared concern. It takes an explicit position that the research needs to be democratic, equitable, liberating and life-enhancing (ibid.) and it seeks to involve community members in respectful and collaborative ways.

Stringer's (1999) approach offers a model for child and youth care practitioners to take a more active community role in organizing and developing solutions to community concerns. The process is one that is a natural extension of the individual work that they already do and one for which their skills in relationship building, respectful communication and problem solving are particularly suited. It shares child and youth care's concern for making a practical difference in the situation at hand and requires that people come together in making this happen. In this way, action research offers possibilities for child and youth care to join together with both other community practitioners and client groups in a process that is geared towards supporting them in collaboratively taking action to improve their communities.

Such a framework can be useful in situations where there is a common concern shared by a variety of practitioners and community members. It offers a process for them to come together to explore their shared concerns, to generate new knowledge and understandings about these concerns and to work together at developing solutions to these concerns. In my own community, an issue identified by foster parents has been taken on by a group comprised of foster parents, social workers, child and youth care practitioners, community youth agencies and youth that has resulted in the development of a pilot project designed to address the issue. The group began by collecting data on the issue through focus groups and individual interviews, reflecting on the information that it collected, developing a proposal for services and submitting a request for funding. Since funding was

approved, the group is moving towards beginning the program and evaluating the process as the program unfolds. What is unique and exciting about this program within our community is that it represents a truly collaborative effort between a variety of agencies and practitioners that is not the norm.

Furthermore it is contributing to the strengthening and development of services for youth in our community in ways that involve both youth and community members in defining the process. It is an example of the ways in which a community-based action research process can support the coming together to address an issue that might otherwise have been left unresolved.

Finally, participatory action research (Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991; Smith et al., 1997) offers an important model for child and youth care practitioners seeking to support community members in improving the quality of their own lives. Issues such as poverty, drug addiction, violence and oppression are the focus of this approach. These are issues that child and youth care practitioners are confronted with everyday and often these concerns have a basis in larger social structures and patterns. As Hall (2001) notes, this approach to action research is “an integrated three-pronged process of social investigation, education and action designed to support those with less power” (p. 171). For child and youth care practitioners this is a grassroots approach to supporting particular community members in learning more about the situations that they find themselves in and taking action to overcome the problems that they are experiencing. It is a process that child and youth care practitioners can learn from as they work alongside

children, youth and families who are struggling with the oppressive features of their social situations.

Law (1997) provides a Canadian example of how this approach to action research was used in supporting parents of disabled children in joining together to tackle environmental barriers to participation for their children within their community. It requires practitioners to suspend their own assumptions about what is going on for these community members and to instead join with them in a process of learning and discovery (Hall, 2001). It requires that practitioners support community members in deepening their own understanding of their situations and in accessing their 'popular knowledge' (Fals-Borda, 1991) by creating their own solutions and taking their own actions to address these problems.

For child and youth care workers it offers a way of empowering members of their community to take their own action. Child and youth care workers could facilitate groups of people who are struggling with the same issue to come together to explore the problem and to generate solutions to those problems that are effective for them. A recent example of child and youth care workers doing just this was presented at the 7<sup>th</sup> International Child and Youth Care Conference in Victoria, B.C. (MacLeod, Schechtel, Stremel, Bruce, 2003). In their project, these child and youth care workers engaged youth in a participatory action research process exploring the transition to adulthood. They brought youth together to explore the transition from youth to adulthood with an eye towards developing supports for other youth

involved in this transition. The youth explored their own experiences and collected data about the transition from other youth. They then analyzed and presented the data for support in reorganizing services geared towards youth involved in the transition to adulthood. This is a powerful example of how participatory action research can be facilitated by child and youth care workers as they support youth in learning about the situations they are encountering and taking action to improve these situations in their community. It is an empowering process for the participants as it invites them to contribute not only to learning more about the current context but also to contribute to the larger knowledge base about the situations they have been struggling with.

Furthermore, the participatory process itself is designed to be liberating. As participants examine their situations, develop solutions and take action on implementing these solutions, they regain some power and control over their circumstances. The process values their contributions to the research and empowers them to take action from what they have learned. As a process it opens up opportunities for participants to retake some control over the situation they are investigating by assisting them in rediscovering their own ability to develop solutions within their lives. Beyond the benefits of the knowledge created and the solutions developed for the whole community, participants also benefit through their participation as skills are strengthened and their contributions are valued.

These are just some of the ways in which action research holds potential for child and youth care practice. The family of action research traditions offers many possibilities for child and youth care practitioners looking for ways to become more involved in research within and for their field. The participatory impulses of action research fit well with the values, beliefs and approaches that characterize child and youth care practice and, in the end, can strengthen and reinforce that practice. By encouraging child and youth care practitioners to both examine and improve their own practices, their program and agency practices and their interagency and community practices, action research can contribute significantly to the current state of the field.

This is not to state, however, that action research represents *the answer* for incorporating research into child and youth care practice. There are many examples of ways in which other traditions of research have contributed significantly to the field and hold potentials for use in child and youth care practice (Anglin, 2002; Eisikovits, 1997; Garfat, 1995, Nakkula and Ravitch, 1998). Furthermore, there are some examples of where attempts at using action research ideas within child and youth care practice have not been successful (Whitaker, Archer and Hicks, 1998). My final chapter will explore some of the ways in which action research has been used in child and youth care in the past as well explore some of the areas that need additional attention as the child and youth care moves forward in the twenty-first century.

## **Chapter Ten**

### **Conclusion: Challenges and Implications**

The compatibility of action research for child and youth care has not gone unnoticed before. In their *Editorial Comment* Kuehne and Artz (1997) remark on how “there are some who would suggest that this method, of all that are available to us, is most compatible with the values embedded in child and youth care work and as such should be the method of choice for the field” (p.306). They go on to say that while they agree that participatory action research “lends itself well to good child and youth care practice” (p.306) that other methodologies also have something to offer to the field. In a special edition of the *Child and Youth Care Forum* (Vol. 26, No. 3) there are three examples of how action research has been used in the field. Yet, despite the apparent enthusiasm for action research within the field, there have not been any extensive reviews of the methodology and how it might be used within child and youth care practice.

In part, it appears to me that this is a reflection of the continued dominance of traditional approaches to research. Action research is an emerging discipline. It has not been widely recognized over the years and it is only beginning to establish itself as a legitimate approach in conducting research. Accordingly, although action research has made an appearance in child and youth care research in previous years, additional work needs to

continue on educating and supporting child and youth care workers who wish to explore this approach.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the work that has been done in child and youth care using participatory action research approaches has recognized the convergences between the approach and child and youth care practice. Penuel and Freeman (1997) observe that child and youth care workers may recognize several important themes of their own work reflected in the goals of action research. They also suggest that “the aim of participatory action research is also consistent with the goal of giving youth opportunities to practice responsibility” (p.178). They utilize action research methods in developing and operating a four day residential conference for youth. Participants were involved in the organization, running and evaluation of the conference. Their article reports the ways in which they used action research to involve youth in the ongoing evaluation of the conference and how their feedback was incorporated into decisions made during the operation of the program. They conclude that being a participant-researcher became a way for youth of participating in the program. They suggest that:

Participatory action research is one good approach to introducing research into programming because it does not view research as separate from practice. Instead it uses the values of participation, inclusion and action—values consistent with youthwork practice—in its very design and in how it is carried out. (p. 185)

This is consistent with my argument that action research offers a way for child and youth care practitioners to both become involved and to involve children youth and families in research on programs.

Ricks (1997) demonstrates how action research can be used in the education of child and youth care workers. Throughout a course on ethics in child and youth care, Ricks engaged students and instructors in an action research process to explore ethics in child and youth care practice. She also notes the convergence of interests between action research and child and youth care practice. The approach supports her beliefs in the importance of self-awareness (1989) in child and youth care work and her beliefs that engaging child and youth care workers in an exploration of themselves and their practices are an important component of ethical decision making (Garfat and Ricks, 1995). In the class, students were engaged as action researchers examining their own ethical decision making practices and the instructors were engaged in examining their facilitation of the class and the research process. The students and instructors worked together in defining the focus of the research, the collection and analysis of the data and the process of the research. In addition to the data on ethics in child and youth care practice that the study produced, Ricks (1997) noted that action research had potential in the supervision, education and training of child and youth care workers. She states that it has the possibility of being a "practical and low-cost methodology [for] yielding useful information within a short period of time" (p. 261).

Recently at the 7<sup>th</sup> International Child and Youth Care Conference held in Victoria, B.C. there were a number of presentations on studies using an action research methodology. One has been reported in a previous chapter. Others included work with racialized minority girls (Lee and Lam, 2003) and an exploration of the making of meaning in child and youth care work (Wilder, 2003). In the closing ceremony participants of the youth conference presented their challenge to child and youth care to include youth as full and active participants in planning and programming for them. "Participation" in research, planning, programming and organizations seems to be emerging as a theme and action research is offering a way in which 'participation' can be achieved.

This is not to say that utilizing action research in child and youth care practice is not without its challenges. Ricks' (1997) study notes that participants found the process demanding and overwhelming. Two of the students were quite frank in stating that they were not willing to commit to such a process within their practice. She states that "for them, fitting into a structure, following policy, playing by the rules was simply easier and was going to take less time" (p.200). Simonson and Bushaw (1993) discuss how despite their best efforts their attempt to include others in the process of research was not very successful. Supporting others to become participants and engaging them as full participants with a sense of ownership and influence in the process is not easy. Miscommunications, organizational

structures, existing belief systems and unstated assumptions all conspire to stand in one's way.

Whitaker et al.'s (1998) attempt to introduce an action research approach within a children's home was also not very successful. They attempted to introduce Lewin's conception of the research cycles in action research as a way for staff in the children's home to begin to reflect on their work. They met a significant amount of resistance to this strategy and were not as successful as they had hoped. They attribute this in part to the immediate demands of the working situation and to the lack of time afforded to child and youth care workers for reflection in their daily work.

In part these are very real constraints. The process of reflection on practice is clearly valued within the literature in child and youth care yet in practice it has been my experience that there is very little (if any) time set aside for this process. In practice there are a large number of competing tasks all vying for the attention of a child and youth care worker in any given moment. There are the needs of the children, the recording and reporting requirements and the expectations of the organization that all require attention. Very often these demands are more than enough to occupy a child and youth care worker throughout the day and precious little time remains for them to engage in any systematic reflection or examination of their practices during that time.

However, the failure of action research for Whitaker et al. (1998) and Simonson and Bushaw (1993) can also be attributed to deviations that were

made in their approaches. In Whitaker et al.'s approach the functions of action research were separated from the ideas that support them. They used action research as a technique without exploring the principles of participation and inclusion in decision making. The spiral of steps was imposed on the staff group and very little effort was made to involve the staff in taking ownership in the process. It was a process imposed to meet the researchers needs and ideas and correspondingly can be seen as an example of how not to conduct action research. McNiff (2002) warns about this very danger and argues that when action research is seen as a set of techniques that are to be applied to a situation it is bound to fail. She suggests that such approaches miss the entire point of action research and recreate patterns of domination and control that action research is trying to avoid.

Simonson and Bushaw (1993) acknowledge that their own failures were a result of not paying enough attention to some of the same issues. They did not pay enough attention to developing a common interest in the research they were facilitating. As a result their process was not successful because they had assumed a community commitment to the foundations of their research when in fact there were competing interests and partial commitment to addressing the problems with which they were engaged. In fact they were met with outright hostility from some groups and indifference from others. Consequently they were not able to garner enough support for their initiative within the community for it to proceed.

What can be learned from both these attempts is that true participation in the design, implementation and process of research by all concerned stakeholders is essential to the process. Child and youth care workers will need to be mindful of this if they chose to conduct action research. It is a challenging and demanding process in terms of time, commitment and energy. For some it may be too much. For others, organizational support may be very difficult to achieve. Yet, for those who persevere, it has some potential for revitalizing the ways in which they practice.

Before this can happen, though, further work will need to be done. This thesis represents a beginning in that it begins to outline some of the possibilities of action research for child and youth care practitioners. There are further gaps that will need to be addressed. I have not discussed the very real ethical issues that exist for practitioners engaging in research. In part this has been a matter of design. This thesis is an exploration of the convergences between action research and child and youth care and is not meant to be either a manual for how to conduct action research or an exemplar of how action research can be developed in practice. This does not mean, however, that these issues do not deserve consideration, rather that they deserve more consideration than was possible to do within this document.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that some would argue that ethical issues in action research are addressed by the research design. The approach insists on an explicit set of social values that require that the

process be democratic, equitable, liberating and life-enhancing (Stringer, 1999). This is not a view that I share. As McNiff et al. (1996) stress, there are specific ethical considerations that all researchers should follow.

Furthermore there are particular ethical considerations that will be important for particular situations. Adopting an action research approach does not automatically address these issues and any practitioner conducting research within their practice will have to give careful thought to the issues that are relevant for their particular situation.

McNiff et al. (1996) identify the basic considerations of negotiating access, securing informed consent, maintaining confidentiality, ensuring participants right to withdraw at any time, keeping others informed, and maintaining good faith. Universities and individual organizations have their own additional expectations that practitioners will have to inform themselves of. Yet as Stuart (1998) points out, even these guidelines may not be sufficient in participatory action research. As Stuart discovered in conducting her participatory action research project, issues can arise for which there are not sufficient guidelines.

This has been recognized by the Canadian *Interagency Advisory Panel on Research Ethics* (PRE) that has been created to advise Canadian agencies on the “evolution, interpretation, implementation and education needs’ of the Canadian *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (TCPS). The TCPS represents the ethical standard for research involving humans in Canada. As recently as August

2003, the panel issued a call for comments on how the TCPS can better address issues involved in conducting action research, among others. They express that the statement offers “little guidance regarding issues and ‘best practices’ “ (PRE, 2003) that characterize these research approaches. Given this situation it is particularly important that individuals embarking on an action research process take the time to carefully consider a number of issues related to action research for which the guidelines are not sufficient.

Specifically the issue of free and informed consent is particularly challenging in action research. Meyer (1993) questions whether achieving informed consent is even possible within an action research project. Given the emergent nature of the process and the ongoing negotiation, definition and focus of the research, Meyer suggests that it is not possible for participants to fully understand what they are committing themselves to at the outset of the project. Things will change and evolve as the project unfolds in ways that cannot be fully predicted at the beginning. For individuals wanting to embark on an action research process this is a significant challenge and processes will need to be in place that recognize that achieving informed consent will likely need to be an ongoing process that is repeatedly negotiated throughout the project rather than existing as a one time procedural requirement at the beginning of a project.

Correspondingly, given the participation requirements of the action research process, maintaining the freedom to withdraw from the research process also becomes a challenge. As the action research group develops

and the process moves along, the pressures to maintain a commitment to the process and the group can increase. If one is to adopt a position that informed consent will have to be regularly negotiated and revisited as a result of the emergent process, then safeguards will need to be developed to ensure that participation demands and group pressures do not exert an influence that restricts a participant's freedom to withdraw from the process. Again, Meyer (1993) discusses how this can happen particularly when institutional expectations supporting the research create unspoken demands in the environment where the research is undertaken.

Additionally, for child and youth care practitioners issues around involving clients in research are particularly important. There are significant risks for clients in being asked to participate in a practitioner's research and there are even greater risks for the vulnerable population of children, youth and families that child and youth care practitioners typically come in contact with. A discussion of these issues is particularly complex and needs to become part of any program that seeks to encourage child and youth care practitioners to become involved in researching their own practice.

Practitioners will need to ensure that steps are taken to ensure that participation is voluntary and that clients feel freely able to decline or withdraw from participation at any time. This is easier said than done where there are power imbalances as in practitioner—client relationships. The introduction of research to this context creates a dual relationship which further challenges the process. Practitioners engaging in action research need to ensure that

their commitment to the project does not exert undue influence on others to participate and need to be prepared to let the project go if they meet resistance to participation from their clients. Given the delicate nature of the relationships that exist, practitioners must ensure that clients are not feeling obligated to participate because of the practitioners' interest or enthusiasm and practitioners must take extra steps to ensure that any client agreeing to participate is doing so freely. Careful attention needs to be taken that clients do not feel that their access to and quality of service may be jeopardized if they decline to participate. As previously noted there are not yet sufficient guidelines for this area in relationship to action research and further work exploring this area is needed. Some universities are beginning to develop guidelines (see UBC, 2003) and these may provide some direction, but ultimately each project will need to consider these issues carefully and take steps to resolve them.

Furthermore, it is questionable whether confidentiality can be assured in some action research projects. The demands of participation and engaging as co-researchers with participants in the project may make confidentiality impossible. This will have to be discussed with the group and agreements will have to be reached in terms of the level of confidentiality desired and how it is to be maintained. Additionally, issues around publication of the results and ownership of the material will need to be discussed. Does the group want the results to be published and if so in what form? Who will be identified in such publications and how? How will information and sources be protected

and/or shared? How will individual's requirements for confidentiality be respected and maintained?

As can be seen from the discussion so far, the entire issue of participation and the forms that it takes in action research projects introduces some significant challenges. Perhaps one of the largest challenges, not yet discussed resolves around ensuring protection from harm. Action research intends not only to examine the current situation but also to promote and encourage change. There can be resistance to change in many quarters and engaging participants in this process may open them up to confrontation and conflict. Project participants may face obstacles and challenges as they begin to question the status quo and meet institutional and community resistance to change. This is particularly significant in sensitive areas where there are significant divisions of interest in the topic. It can be further magnified when it is an area that involves vulnerable populations. Minkler, Fadem, Perry, Blum, Moore and Rogers (2002) discuss such a situation and the challenges that they faced in an action research project involving the disability community and the issue of physician assisted suicide legislation. Challenges around questions of inclusiveness, problem definitions, project team membership, and subsequently highly emotionally charged debates surrounded the project. Addressing these issues proved to be particularly challenging as they met resistance to the project, struggled with developing and maintaining a research group that was inclusive of the many sides of the issue and worked to provide safeguards for those involved in the project. They undertook the

project, despite its controversial topic because while a number of high profile groups had taken strong positions on the topic the voices of those most directly effected, individuals with disabilities, were not necessarily being heard. The project demonstrates both the value of action research in involving participants in research on issues that impact them directly as well as the challenges and risks involved in conducting such research,

As Williamson and Prosser (2002) note, action research can be “politically and ethically problematic for researchers and participants” (p. 588) as the close and collaborative relationships inherent in the process introduce “a greater element of ‘exposure.’” (ibid). They suggest that the process introduces the possibility and hope for change that faces the risk of not being realized. They suggest that as participants embark on the process they may discover contradictions between formal mission statements and the informal realities and practices within the area they are investigating. In situations where the research threatens to expose and challenge this, participants may find that there is not a willingness to change and they may find themselves in conflict with powerful proponents of the status quo. They state that:

Having uncovered areas in need of change, action researchers and participants in their own organizations can be at greater personal risk, and more exposed, than in traditional research. They can be seen potentially as ‘loose cannons rocking the boat’, with possible consequences for their careers in that organization. (p. 589)

These are important issues to examine and understand prior to engaging in the research process. The risks and potential for harm can be great and both

researchers and participants need to fully consider the potentials for harm both as they begin an action research process and throughout it as they proceed.

Finally, given the inherent developmental differences between adults and children, the entire question of how and when to involve children in the action research process is highly relevant for child and youth care practitioners seeking to conduct research in their practice. Adults in all societies have power over children. This makes them automatically vulnerable to coercion and exploitation, deliberate or not. Children engaged with child and youth care practitioners are often at an increased vulnerability given the challenges they are confronting and the histories that they bring. Special care, attention, and protection needs to be given to children's situations if they are going to be involved in research. Furthermore given the participatory nature of action research, special attention needs to be given to the ways in which children can be invited to participate and the processes that will be used to ensure that their views, thoughts and ideas are given equal consideration by the adults involved in the study.

There is a growing literature on children and participation within the developmental aid research. Save the Children (2000) have developed a document that discusses the issues of research with children and young people that is valuable here. Additionally UNICEF's report on *The State of the World's Children 2003* devotes a significant amount of attention to the issues of children's participation. Both of these documents stress that it is a

right for children to participate and be involved in decisions affecting them. For them it is not a question of whether children should be involved as participants in research but rather it is a question of how the research processes used can be adapted so as to ensure that children can freely participate in a meaningful way if they so choose.

This is not to suggest that it is always necessary or appropriate to involve children in research. Save the Children (2000) provide a list of questions that should be asked prior to involving children in research that are important here. They suggest that researchers should carefully question whether the research is really necessary, why children's participation in the research is necessary, how the research will provide some tangible benefits for the children, whether the researcher has the skills and abilities to conduct the research effectively, whether the children have the skills and abilities to participate fully and whether the researcher has the resources to adequately protect, support and follow up with the children involved in the study. They note that depending on the ages, skills and abilities of the children, participation may need to be focused on some to all of the research stages. It may or may not be realistic or appropriate that children be involved in all stages of a participatory research project. Certainly the demands of full participation may not be realistic for younger children particularly, however, this does not mean that they should be excluded from participating in ways that they are able.

Regardless, any research involving children needs to have a primary focus on the ethical issues and challenges involved in the research. As Save the Children (2000) state, “any researcher who does not give due consideration to ethics is potentially damaging the people researched and those carrying out the research” (p.8). Special attention needs to be given to protection from harm, informed consent, levels of participation, the purposes of the research, and follow-up support when involving children in the research process. These issues must take precedence over the research itself and researchers must take extra care to ensure that children are protected from harm. Research processes need to be examined for how they may impact children and to ensure that they are appropriate for the abilities of the children or youth being invited to participate. Care and attention will need to be given to the uses of language, methods, concepts and discourses so that they enable rather than limit the participation of the young people involved. Furthermore, participation in the process itself may have negative effects on participants that need to be considered, addressed and protected against as the process unfolds. Supports and resources need to be in place to ensure that sufficient protection and support are available both during and after the project.

All of these issues reinforce the need for further work to be done in examining how research may be incorporated into practice. There are significant challenges that must be addressed and this thesis is only a beginning of that exploration. Action research holds some promising

potentials for child and youth care practitioners in examining and improving their practices, yet for it to be successful child and youth care practitioners will need to develop an understanding of the ethical issues and thought behind the action research approach. Recognizing the compatibility between the two approaches is only the first step. Adopting such an approach has implications for education, training and policy development that require further examination.

If it is to be adopted within child and youth care practice, action research will need to be included in the curriculum in training child and youth care practitioners. There are some indications that this is happening (Pealo, 1998) in some places. During my coursework within this masters program, however, action research was barely mentioned and was not specifically taught. Our research courses focused on traditional qualitative and quantitative research methods and did not more specifically address some of the alternative methods that might have been suitable for child and youth care. In fairness to our instructors, there may not have realistically been the time to do this within the constraints of our program. Nevertheless, it is going to be important that child and youth care practitioners, particularly those returning to do advanced studies, are being exposed to research paradigms that are compatible with their work if university training programs are going to be successful at interesting them using research for advanced reflection within their practice.

Moreover, child and youth care practitioners will need to be supported in coming to value the knowledge and experiences that they develop in doing their work. Traditional conceptualizations of knowledge production do not typically value the knowledge that practitioners develop (Schon, 1983). Child and youth care students and practitioners do not see the understandings that they develop in the course of their practice as knowledge. They are encouraged, and required, during the course of their training to reflect on their learning but the reflections they produce are not necessarily validated as knowledge.

An example exists within child and youth care practicum courses at the University of Victoria. During these course students are required to submit reflections on their learning for evaluation by their instructors. Both the students and the university view these documents as requirements for the completion of the course. However, examples exist in other jurisdictions, notably the Department of Education at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, where advanced practicums are used as opportunities not only for the gaining of experience but also as opportunities for students to engage in research into their practices and to participate in the generation of knowledge (see [http://educ.queensu.ca/projects/action\\_research/guide.htm](http://educ.queensu.ca/projects/action_research/guide.htm)). Child and youth care could follow this example and begin to introduce the idea to child and youth care practitioners that they are capable of participating in the development of knowledge within the field.

For this to happen, though, consideration will need to be given to the ways that action research can be introduced. Different forms of action research have different requirements and demands that need to be considered. Conducting action research that is focused in the individual in practice as in McNiff (2002) has different skill requirements and expectations than more open and emergent processes as those suggested by Greenwood and Levin (1998) or Stringer (1999). Some action research approaches require that researchers already have well developed understandings of a variety of research methods for facilitating the action research group's process and these skills will need to be considered and developed.

Some approaches may not be suited for use within a practicum course and may be better suited for more advanced thesis, dissertation, or postgraduate work. As Meyer (1993) notes, the action research process itself does not always lend itself well to work geared towards the completion of academic requirements. The emergent process and broad participation requirements, will direct the process in unique ways. It can be challenging and demanding work that cannot always be accommodated within the time frames and expectations of an academic course. Meyer (1993) notes that "there may be quicker ways of gaining a PhD" (p.1071) and that the demands of the process are time consuming and potentially overwhelming. Obtaining approval, recruiting a group, initiating a project, securing resources and seeing the project through all take more time and involve more people than other approaches.

These same challenges exist within child and youth care practice. It is not that they are insurmountable but rather that they need careful consideration and accommodation as we consider how research might be incorporated into practice. As already noted, this paper does not provide a guide on how to conduct research within practice. It has only begun to scratch the surface of the ways in which action research might be used within child and youth care practice. Further work will need to be done in operationalizing these ideas. If child and youth care workers are going to be taught action research as a method for use in their training and practice, work will need to explore how this can be done, ways in which the methods can best be taught and what the appropriate avenues are in which it might be used. Some aspects of practice may be more conducive to the approach than others. Further research will need to explore the both the experience of initiating action research within child and youth care practice and the limitations and pitfalls inherent in the approach.

Finally, for action research to be adopted in practice attention needs to be given to the policy contexts in which child and youth care practitioners work. Currently there is an increased focus on and demand for 'evidence-based' practice within British Columbia's social service system (Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2003). The call is for services to be able to provide clearer evidence of the effectiveness of their practices and to provide documentation that demonstrates that they are achieving the outcomes outlined in their contracts. Action research has some significant

potential in not only assisting practitioners in developing such 'evidence' but also for influencing the ways in which such evidence is generated.

As the systems in which child and youth care practitioner work go through transformation and reorganization, practitioners have an opportunity to contribute to the ways in which that work is done. By bringing people together to address issues of mutual concern, action research can provide a framework for individuals, programs, agencies and communities to contribute to the greater dialogue on policy development and the ways in which their work is done. By conducting research in practice, practitioners have an ability to present their findings to policy makers and to potentially influence the shape that policy takes.

Such an approach will require that time and resources are set aside for conducting research within practice. In the current climate this represents a potentially overwhelming challenge. In an era of downsizing, cutbacks and seemingly endless reorganization, resources are not readily available and trust between individuals and organizations has been significantly eroded. Collaboration and cooperation is outwardly encouraged, but with individuals and organizations under constant threat of having their funding cut or removed, there is a real fear of 'making waves' or 'rocking the boat.' Individuals and organizations are becoming more defensive and isolated as they try to limit their exposure to the negative effects of the current restructuring.

Yet the risk of not engaging in the process is equally as great. Policy makers are determined to move forward with rethinking the way in which social services are managed and delivered. They would like to see that services being funded are being effectively and efficiently delivered. If child and youth care practitioners and clients of the services affected do not begin to involve themselves in the dialogue around such changes, the changes will go ahead without their input. As Winkler et al. (2002) demonstrate, action research can support the development of a voice and an engagement in the dialogue around policy development for those not typically involved. Such engagement could dramatically impact the ways in which policy gives shape to child and youth care practice that are more in line with both practitioners and children, youth and families concerns.

In closing, I return to the beginning of this paper. I began from a place where research and practice had existed in mutual exclusion of each other. I came to action research with a belief that I was not cut out to be a researcher and that child and youth care practice was where my feet were planted. The journey of researching and writing this paper has re-ignited my belief that research and practice can coexist. I am aware that I do not have all of the answers but I recognize that, in itself, is part of the process. For me, action research has opened up a plethora of possibilities for both becoming more involved in the development of child and youth care work while remaining firmly planted within child and youth care practice. I am excited about the

possibilities that exist and as I move forward I hope to have the opportunity to continue to explore them further.

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