

## Evidence & Policy

# 'I see a totally different picture now': an evaluation of knowledge exchange in childcare practice

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## **‘I see a totally different picture now’: an evaluation of knowledge exchange in childcare practice**

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### **Abstract**

This article draws on a critical evaluation of a knowledge exchange (KE) project, *Food for Thought*, devised to promote and develop awareness of the use of food within children’s residential and foster care services. From the 22 qualitative interviews conducted, reflections on the differing forms of knowledge incorporated into the design of the project and its outputs are discussed and the limitations of current thinking on ‘knowledge exchange’ are explored. Finally, links are made to how this reflective approach to practice operationalized and enlivened local and national food and care policies.

Key words: partnership, knowledge exchange, applied research

### **Introduction**

This paper draws on an ESRC (*Economic and Social Research Council*) funded knowledge exchange (KE) project, *Food for Thought*, which aimed to promote and develop awareness of the use of food within children’s residential and foster care services. The project promoted the value of reflecting on food and food practices and suggested that through employing the lens of food, wider and often more sensitive issues relating to care experiences could be brought to the fore. The article considers the knowledge exchange process involved in developing *the Food for Thought* suite of five evidence based practice resources for foster carers, residential workers and their supervisors. Particular attention is given to the process of mutual learning as well as to the challenges practitioners and academics faced in integrating and mediating practice based policies around food.

Knowledge exchange [KE] has become increasingly central to the research and development agenda (Contandriopoulos et al. 2010; Denicolo ed. 2013; Desouza, 2003; Gagnon 2011; Knight and Lightowler 2010; Lightowler and Knight 2013; Mitton et al. 2007; Ward et al. 2012). In essence, KE seeks to ensure that academic research has an applied and useful impact and benefit beyond the academy (Lightowler and Knight 2013; Mitchell et al. 2009).

However, it is not without its critics (e.g. Davies et al. 2008). Indeed, some argue that the focus on an outcome-driven agenda has undermined exploratory and theoretical developments across a range of disciplines.

Contandriopoulous et al. (2010) suggest that knowledge exchange processes occur at two distinct, if complementary, levels. The first relates to projects which target 'autonomous individuals', where individuals, influenced by their own characteristics, motivations and context, will uniquely respond to the information, knowledge or intervention being presented. The second occurs at a collective level, where the actions of the individual[s] are shaped by, and are dependent on, wider organisational or policy systems. Recognising the organisational policy, or even political, context is thus important when seeking to affect change through research or improve access to, and engagement with, the knowledge being presented. Contandriopoulous et al. (2010: 455) go on to argue that it is imperative that researchers consider the complexity of knowledge exchange systems over and above a model of individual learning and development. This is particularly so given that, whilst it may be that individual actions or responses are the target for change, such individuals are '...exposed to institutional incentives and broader social norms and values'.

In a residential and foster care context, the targets for change are rarely the social and structural factors which often significantly contribute to the social problems leading to children being placed at risk. Rather, the targets become the particular behaviour, approaches and actions of individual children, families, practitioners or carers. The broader context in which foster carers and residential staff operate is, nevertheless, important to consider when thinking about how best to work together to create change and develop understanding and knowledge. Whilst *Food for Thought* encouraged individual reflection and changes to direct practice, it also emphasised the importance of [re]thinking views on family norms, food policy at local and national level, the ethos of institutions and agencies and wider social beliefs and practices around food and care. Contandriopoulous et al. comment that:

Actual knowledge exchange systems thus are complex because they are made up of complex human actors. This may seem obvious, but the literature is rife with oversimplifications, the three most common of which are discussing the hypothetical relations between one user and one producer, reifying users or producers as

homogeneous groups (a slightly more sophisticated version of the first error), and disregarding the complexity of human motivations by attributing intrinsic group based preferences or interest to users, producers, or intermediaries. (2010: 456)

The above quote is a helpful starting point from which to make sense of the experiences of the *Food for Thought* research team, partners, foster carers and residential staff involved in the development of the practice resources. Knowledge was not exchanged simply from one party to the other in a linear fashion. Indeed as Davies et al. suggest, avoiding such an approach is key to maximising the co-productive aspect of knowledge:

Knowledge and power are intimately co-constructed, with more powerful players better able to assert the standing and influence of their own knowledge. (2008:189)

In the case of *Food for Thought*, knowledge exchange was both dynamic and challenging. In this sense the approach was more in keeping with the principles of 'integrated knowledge translation (IKT) (Bowen et al. 2013). As Kothari et al. point out IKT '... requires active collaboration between researchers and the ultimate users of knowledge throughout a research process' (2013: 1). However, we are in broad agreement with Webb (2001), although he perhaps overstates his case (see Gilgun 2005 and Sheldon 2001), when he urges caution in relation to the mechanistic implementation of knowledge through positivistic evidence-based practice models. As he points out:

The view that evidence-based practice is scientific and its methodologies are objective is a value-laden belief which is being constantly fostered in social work practice and government policy (74)

Although implementation of our findings needs to be rigorous and 'scientific' as possible (Bauer et al. 2015; Gagliardi 2016) our approach was more focussed upon a sharing of ideas and awareness raising leading to change than the collection and handing over of 'facts'.

While the constant re-evaluation of extant knowledge was critical to the process of developing a shared understanding and agreement on the way forward, the process was by no means characterised at every stage by harmonious agreement across and between all those involved. What the project revealed was that foster and residential care was a nexus

of individual adult and child histories, memories, beliefs and expectations around care, childhood and family life. What at first glance had appeared to be a simple task of translating research findings into practice resources resulted in wider and deeper reflection on care itself. Indeed, discussions of food appeared to act as a lens through which to explore these myriad dynamics (Punch et al. 2009; 2010). Accessing and exploring the knowledge required to develop the resources meant that participants brought a range of experiences and emotions to the learning space in a way that was not simply a mechanical giving over of ideas or suggestions for practice, but a far more complex filtering and exchange of experiences and memories. It is to this process that the remainder of the paper turns.

The paper begins by outlining the current policy and practice landscape of Scottish residential and foster care and the drivers for change in relation to the continued learning and development of carers. It then outlines the *Food for Thought* project and explores some of the key principles of knowledge exchange and how these applied. The views and experiences of the academics, foster carers and practitioners who participated in this knowledge exchange process are discussed and presented. Finally, the paper examines the ways in which the approach taken to knowledge exchange appeared to shift ideas concerning the direction of practice from the written policy document to a shared vision or culture of practice.

### **Background: Residential and foster care in Scotland**

Over the last three decades there have been significant changes to the ways in which Scotland cares for and protects children considered by the state to be 'at risk'. For example, the most recent published statistics (Scottish Government 2014) show that there were 15,404 children in looked after care in Scotland, with only 1,529 of these being in residential placements. This demographic reflects the now well-established political and policy discourse rooted in the notion that children are best cared for within a family, even if it is not their own. This policy shift has resulted in a significant rise in kinship care arrangements and a notable change in the needs of children in foster, as well as in residential, care (Harnett et al. 2012). A number of authors indicate that children in foster care are now far more likely to have chronic, complex and enduring emotional and behavioural needs, both as a response to their early years experiences and, for many, as a result of multiple placement breakdowns (cf. Nutt 2006).

Over recent years, the role of carer for looked after children has also been dramatically altered (Schofield et al. 2000). Whilst once it was regarded as that of a pastoral, 'substitute' parent, it has come to be viewed as a professional 'job' in which residential and foster carers are expected to support children with highly complex needs. Increasingly, the placement experience is required not only to be an improvement on the experiences the child had in his or her birth family but also to provide a vehicle for the child's recovery, repair and growth.

There has been a plethora of policies and initiatives that have sought to standardise and safeguard the care that such children receive. In relation to food and food practices, these have ranged from general care standards through nutritional guidelines to health and hygiene requirements (Scottish Government 2009; 2011). The direct care of children has been dominated by a discourse of risk and risk minimisation, a narrative that often overshadows the everyday decisions taken by carers (Houston and Griffiths 2000). Arguably, the pursuit of such standardisation and the acute concern with risk has resulted in the care dynamic becoming an increasingly technical, rationalised endeavour that can be measured, monitored and evaluated (Ruch et al. 2010). From such a position, caring can be reduced to a package of set skills and prescribed interventions.

Given all this, there is increasing recognition that 'training' and development and support should be provided to front line carers (SSSC 2015). Indeed, improving the skills and confidence of foster carers has been seen as key to placement stability (Hill-Tout et al. 2003). Finding ways to support staff and carers to explore both the experience of caring for children and the complex dynamics and powerful emotions that such work can generate, has been a central challenge to care providers. Indeed, providers walk a tightrope between introducing training and monitoring whilst at the same time supporting and allowing for a dynamic and relational service for children and young people.

## **Food for Thought**

### *Background*

The *Food for Thought* study was borne out of a previous ESRC funded project, the *Food and Care Study* (FaCS) which explored the ways in which food is used symbolically by children and staff in residential care in Scotland. Employing 18 months of participant observation in three children's homes as well as 12 group and 49 individual interviews. The data

demonstrated that the everyday use of food, and the social practices surrounding it, were employed by staff and children alike to communicate thoughts, feelings and beliefs. Thus, food had relevance for looked after children that went far beyond the importance of food as a source of nutrition. It highlighted the significance of shared symbolic meanings and understanding between and amongst children and their carers and the powerful impact this had on relationships, recovery and the sense of belonging that the children felt (Emond et al. 2013, McIntosh et al. 2011).

As part of the *FaCS* dissemination process, the research team produced a resource handbook targeted at residential staff which aimed to illustrate the various ways that food was being used and experienced in their service and what children and staff thought and felt about this (Punch et al. 2009). The feedback on the handbook was that, whilst many residential staff enjoyed reading it and considered it informative and revelatory, they found it too long and not always easy to translate into their everyday practice. Ultimately, it was recognised as a means of allowing academics to disseminate their research findings in an accessible way to practitioners but it lacked clear, direct, applicable tools for use in their working lives. Rather, carers indicated that they would derive more benefit from direct learning resources tailored to their unique working environment and which allowed for their current experiences and challenges.

Whilst the original *FaCS* project had focused on experiences within the residential care setting, the staff handbook attracted a great deal of attention from foster carers. The symbolic, rather than nutritional, use of food by carers and children clearly chimed with their experiences. As a result of these two sets of feedback, the academic team contacted a number of organisations with a view to translating the *FaCS* material into a range of learning and development resources. What resulted was the development of the *Food for Thought* project which had from the outset, co-production at its centre (Smith et al. 2013; Tisdall 2013; Yelland and Saltmarsh 2013; Chan 2013).

#### *The Food for Thought Project*

The *Food for Thought* proposal was written with the involvement of participants who would later form the future steering group for the project. These included three partner agencies (one local authority, one voluntary and one private sector) and two national knowledge exchange organisations (one whose aim was promoting and developing residential and

foster care and other with a wider social care remit). The group worked together on developing the shape and direction of the project, key roles and the process through which the practice resources would be developed.

The *Food for Thought* project set out four key objectives. The first was to influence local policy and practice around food. The second aimed to make a contribution to current debates on conceptualisations of care. The third linked to the expectation that the resources themselves would serve as a mechanism for capacity building; by working with partners and by promoting learning based on sharing and exchanging knowledge rather than handing over 'expert' knowledge, the central tenets of *Food for Thought* would become embedded in cultures of practice (Chan 2013). Finally, the project aimed to support the creation of reflexive institutions, encouraging users of the resources to think about how the culture of the family/institutional home might fit with the individual needs of the child being cared for. Overarching all of this, the project argued that food and food practices were relatively neutral routes for managers, support workers and peers to [re]explore the care being exchanged (Emond et al. 2013; Dorrer et al. 2010; McIntosh et al. 2010; Punch et al. 2011; Punch et al. 2014).

### ***Development of Food for Thought resources***

Wenger et al. (2002) suggest that for co-production to be achieved, the group must share a common goal or concern and, through working and learning together, develop ways to apply knowledge usefully to generate meaningful resources. As outlined above, partner representatives (managers and others with key L&D roles in the different organisations) were closely involved in the *Food for Thought* funding proposal. Once funding was secured they, along with a range of foster care and residential staff from each of their agencies took part in a series of six developmental discussion groups. Initially the groups explored the training and support that participants had previously experienced. They then focused on the FaCS project and how findings could be used in the practice context. From this, the team began to identify the types of resources that would be most effective, useful and accessible to carers and staff. Initial drafts of the resources were then shared and discussed in the final discussion group sessions.

Once the resources were fully drafted, two pilot Reflective ('training') Workshops were run in each of the three care provider partner organisations. The pilots aimed to ensure that the

resources captured the views and experiences of a wide range of carers in different settings and that the final resources would resonate with and be 'owned' by those involved in practice. Feedback from the pilot Reflective Workshops was carefully analysed and discussed and resources were adapted to reflect the views expressed.

The *Food for Thought* project produced five resources: an on-line *Interactive Introduction*, a *Facilitators' Resources Pack* to support delivery of Reflective Workshops, a *Reflective Tool* which guided users through a series of questions about their role as carers as well as the child they were caring for, a *JOTIT Notebook* which sought to do the same in a more informal and immediate way by acting as a 'scribble pad' for use by carers and children and *Peer Support Guidance* to facilitate a peer support group on food and food practices.

## **Method**

Whilst *Food for Thought* focused on the development and dissemination of evidence based resources for practice it also committed to evaluating the impact of these resources on practice and to examine the experience of partnership working in knowledge exchange research. A qualitative approach was adopted for this evaluative phase (Barusch 2011; Lietz et al. 2006; Rolfe 2004) with several objectives in mind. Firstly, we wanted to ensure that participants were able to speak freely about their experiences and that their confidentiality and anonymity could be assured. Secondly, it was imperative that members of the academic team were included as participants. Consequently, we appointed an external researcher to co design an interview schedule and undertake data collection and analysis.

Near completion of the project, all those who had been involved in the steering group and the developmental discussion groups were approached to participate in individual interviews. From this sample, a total of 22 participants volunteered; six partner representatives from the steering group, four foster carers, three supervising social workers, four academics and five residential staff. Approval to conduct the interviews was granted by the Faculty of Social Science, University of Stirling Ethics Committee.

Each hour long, semi structured interview explored participants' experience of being part of the *Food for Thought* project, paying particular attention to the processes involved in translating research into useful and useable practice tools and the experience of working collaboratively. These evaluative interviews aimed to scrutinize the partnership relationship

and the dynamic experience of co-production. All interviews were anonymously transcribed to ensure that the identities of participants were protected. Data were then thematically analysed by the independent researcher using a model similar to that proposed by Boehm and Boehm (2003: 287). This four-stage approach to thematic analysis requires an initial immersion in the transcripts allowing the content to be formulated into categories or themes. Next, 'descriptive and explanatory codes' were added to the transcripts. This was essential given that, to ensure confidentiality, none of the research team were privy to the full transcripts. Finally, the original academic team then undertook a further analysis of these themes to respond to the research aim.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### *Integrating learning: relevance, legitimacy and accessibility*

#### Relevance

Contandriopoulous et al. (2010) argue that 'new' knowledge is often competing for users' attention as participants have to balance it with existing ways of working or of viewing the world. Their sense of connectedness to this new knowledge is, they argue, reliant on its relevance, legitimacy and accessibility. A central theme emerging from the data was the ways in which previous experiences of 'training' or learning and development impacted on how *Food for Thought* had been approached by participants. Foster carers and residential staff in particular outlined the wide range of topics and variety of 'training' they had had. They commented on issues that they felt should be considered when developing new resources for practice including; the need to build on existing knowledge, avoiding 'shaming' participants by exposing or criticising gaps in their knowledge and the importance of keeping training 'down to earth' and relevant. Many described feeling concerned that the time spent in learning or development activities often took away from the pressing day-to-day work of supporting children.

Some of the participants stated that they had previously struggled to link the different strands of learning and development offered to them into a cohesive model of practice. Like those involved in Sinclair's study (2005), participants described leaving previous 'training' with an initial sense of elation but then felt that they struggled to sustain or integrate these ideas into their everyday routines. However, for a number of participants, involvement in *Food for Thought* allowed them the opportunity to bring their knowledge and expertise to

actively contribute to a wider discussion and to actively contribute to a different way of presenting research data to practitioners:

*... being able to be part of something that was I suppose a bigger project because so much of our work we've got our head down and we're very involved in the minutia of people's lives. It was really nice to be involved in something that was bigger than that (Karen)*

Many participants reported that their motivation to take part in *Food for Thought* was because of concerns relating to the nutritional experiences of children and/or unease about children's behaviours around food. They suggested that often this was made worse by the tensions between these concerns and what were seen as policy requirements (e.g. nutritional guidelines in national and local food policies, the implications of health and hygiene standards). Participants described a major transformation in their thinking through their involvement in *Food for Thought* when these concerns were augmented by an understanding of the, often deeply held and powerful, symbolic meanings around food and food practices; a change of perception that often came as a something of a revelation to of the participants. It seemed that by 'feeling' as well as 'thinking' a connection between 'training' and practice generated higher levels of interest, motivation and meaning.

*To me personally, it's made me think about food differently um... I think that's probably maybe sort of a result of this that wasn't anticipated, if you like, having that impact on you personally as well. (Karen)*

*I think it's just a whole different insight around food, what it's like for a child going into a care setting... That whole thing has just opened my eyes. (Linda)*

It appeared that food was something that everyone had experience of, could relate to and agree as being central to the care experiences of children. The project in this sense was seen as having immediate relevance to the day-to-day care work being undertaken:

*...there's something about the basics of life, it's like getting up and getting washed and having your breakfast, and getting tucked up in bed you know, they're so basic but so important to be nice... so many of the children we look after ... all of that goes on they don't get to enjoy it you know and people just react to their behaviours. (Marie)*

## Legitimacy

The legitimacy of the information being imparted was also a key consideration. Those involved in the developmental discussion groups highlighted how quickly the topic of food stimulated discussion about participants' own experiences, both personally and professionally.

*I was struck by the power of the emotion evoked in me when talking about my food memory from my childhood (Mary)*

Since the project stressed the importance of being aware of ones' own memories, symbolic understandings and practices around food, discussions were naturally inclusive of all; all contributions had equal merit, thus challenging hierarchical views in which the voice of the expert takes precedence over that of others:

*... it made me think about the challenges but also about my own values and where I get my values for food. You know what I mean? (Debbie)*

Responding to many of the issues raised in the developmental discussion groups a number of the *Food for Thought* resources offered structured opportunities for peer rather than 'academic' learning and support. The value of such opportunities was reported as significantly enhancing their legitimacy. Participants highlighted the usefulness of having space to reflect and to learn from each other.

*I thought it was good to see how other carers dealt with ... different situations that we get put into with different children. (Lorraine)*

*... it was all so eye opening to what people were actually saying from the homes and different foster carers. I see a totally different picture now. (Linda)*

The involvement of other carers was also reported as creating a more supportive atmosphere and crucially one where the perspectives of academics or managers could be challenged. Therefore, the learning environment needed to be one which felt as encouraging and accepting as possible, whilst allowing for the possibility of contestation and robust exchanges. In other studies, carers have stated that voicing the challenges or worries they have in relation to the child they are caring for could result in that child being removed from their care or they themselves being seen as less than competent (Murray et al. 2011).

Fears of not 'following policy and procedures' or of 'getting it wrong' had left many practitioners with a sense of feeling paralysed in response to some day to day situations with children. Interestingly, from the data it appeared that in the pilot of the *Food for Thought* resources, foster and residential carers learned from others how policy had been managed, applied and adapted by different individuals and organisations to suit the needs of the children currently in their care. The striking differences between how such national policies were being applied were of note.

#### Accessibility

It was clear from the data that any knowledge exchange resources needed to accommodate a range of learning styles as well as take account of practical considerations impacting on carers such as transport, time pressures, child care/shift cover. The resources needed to be flexible and reusable. Whilst face-to-face development opportunities were recognised as being useful, participants were also keen to find ways in which any learning gained could be applied directly to the care of *individual* children and could be accessed in a range of ways. They wanted opportunities for people to connect with the findings of the project at different levels, from the practical to the conceptual, and they wanted to do so both individually as well as in group settings.

The *Food for Thought* resources emphasised the usefulness of hypothesising around what adults and children may be communicating or conveying in their use of food. By stressing *the range* of possibilities, participants described feeling more able to voice more difficult or potentially controversial views. In this way, *Food for Thought* appeared to raise awareness of issues rather than prescribing either standard interpretations for the behaviour or the interventions required. Indeed, Smith et al. (2013:4) challenge the appropriateness of an evidence based approach to direct care practice arguing that unlike medicine, social work '...has always been an explicitly value laden profession in which practitioners' judgements and interpretations play an active role'.

#### *Learning through relationships*

Participants stressed that learning rather than training required an atmosphere of emotional containment, empathy and trust. The *Food for Thought* project had worked from the principle of encouraging consideration of cultural practices, values and beliefs around food

rather than identifying unilateral strategies or interventions. In this way, it was hoped that reflection, discussion and hypothesising would allow better decision-making to emerge and greater recognition of the uniqueness of each child's experience of, and expressions through, food. The project therefore aimed to support practitioners to develop and embed, 'felt knowledge' rather than instrumental, cognitive 'answers' to what might be seen as problematic behaviour around food. Desouza (2003) suggests that this can be constructed as 'tacit knowledge'. It was hoped that by working from this principle, ideas underpinning the symbolic use of food would become incorporated into everyday, routine, practice rather than becoming an external, theoretical set of ideas that may or may not come easily to mind. As one of the participants stated: put it:

*So that it becomes... a meaningful and living part of the fabric of people's thinking and practice and not just 'oh we've got to do that' but actually it becomes digested.*  
(Dianne)

Similar to the findings of Smith et al. (2013), relationships were viewed as central to the experience of those participating in the project. Interestingly, these relationships were not simply between the academic team and practitioner participants in the project but across and between these two groups, even where this involved overcoming potential tensions and challenges. What seemed to be significant was that, implicitly, participants viewed the relationships as vital, not simply to the project outcomes but, more importantly, to the process of the knowledge exchange:

*I have also enjoyed working with the range of people. I think that bit about the different perspectives has been quite helpful* (Andrew).

Participants suggested that a number of factors contributed to successful co-production. Many of these echoed research findings relating to effective partnership working (Lymbery, 2006). The inclusive approach, the level of information sharing, the tone of communications, warmth of interactions, commitment to the project and the feeling of mutual accountability were highlighted as being significant:

*...there was a real kind of positive tone of voice in meetings, and also in the emails so that really made for good partnership working and because we had that relationship*

*when I saw emails coming through I thought I need to make sure I read that...for me there was a sense of accountability if that makes sense, not wanting to let somebody down... (Caroline).*

It appeared that the year long duration of the project, and early collaboration in the proposal stage, was such that it allowed space for relationships to grow and be tested. Trust was allowed to develop in a meaningful way. A number of participants suggested that fundamental to trust developing were the steering group meetings. These monthly events were a chance for members to share their experiences of the work, often extending into wider debates about practice, social change, policy and politics. The data highlighted that over time, the nature of the discussion became more personal, open and in many ways more useful. Focussing discussions on food appeared to allow for exploration and debate on a range of complex care issues and wider policy and political shifts. Participants commented on how food was both the catalyst and focus for thinking about such a wide range of topics. This revisiting and re-experiencing, in such a direct way, of the usefulness of the project appeared to re-energise and re-motivate the group. On a more practical level, steering group members described swapping resources and contacts that encompassed broader practice issues. This appeared to maintain the forward momentum of the project.

#### *The personal and professional self*

Participants commented on the impact that involvement in the knowledge exchange process had had on them both personally and professionally:

*It's been very interesting. It's been quite stimulating. It's given me a lot to think about ... on that basis that's prompted quite a lot of conversations with other colleagues and again there's been a level of interest there. (Andrew)*

It appeared that from the outset, the partnership itself became a forum from which all members, not just the academic team, could learn and benefit. However, it was clear from the data that given the time and resources that others could give to the project, the academic team set agendas and drove much of the process. To help overcome this potential tension in the balance between contributors, participants thought it was essential that the steering group allowed for differing voices and agendas to be aired. For many involved in the developmental stages, it seemed that the *process* of development was as important as the

end resources. Participation in the steering group appeared to go beyond providing advice or comment. It was in itself a vehicle to explore participants' own practice and to reflect on views and beliefs which in turn created an atmosphere of creativity and energy:

*I think sometimes they're the gems that in any relational model of working one person sparks off another and when you have a fairly wide range of experiences around the table you feed off that and hopefully you allow another person to feed as well so there's an exchange of thoughts and ideas and suddenly you arrive at a point where everyone goes 'wow, we've got something' and you try to grab those moments. (Robert)*

The opportunity for steering group members to meet in an environment where they were not competing for business or resources but were all equal participants in a shared objective appeared to have proved fruitful both in terms of group learning and also as a means of reflecting on the experience of their own organisations:

*It's good to hear what's going on in other organisations. It's good to check out where we're at in terms of development. (Robert)*

Participants described the benefit of being able to reflect and discuss in an atmosphere where they were viewed as 'expert' and where their views were respected and appreciated. This appeared to contribute to participants' view of the project and their willingness to remain involved:

*I suppose because I'm so involved in it I'm much more... much more aware of it as a thing. I suppose it's been more sort of confirming really. (Hazel )*

Most participants valued the opportunity to actively and meaningfully contribute to the development of the resources, not just in terms of their content but also the approach taken to learning and development. As one participant describes:

*It had been a journey that has led us now through all that discussion and all that piloting has enabled us to say do you know what that needs to be different and we probably couldn't have known that at the beginning although it would have been easier (Robert)*

In many of the interviews, the language used by participants to describe both the project and the process was notable. Most talked in terms of the collective ownership, using phrases such as 'our experience', 'our resources'. The data appeared to suggest that the separation between 'academic' and 'practice' partners was not seen as particularly problematic for those involved. Perhaps because of this, the motivation to produce something 'worthwhile' was sustained throughout the life of the project and led to a significant number of those involved in the initial stages remaining involved and committed to the partnership, long after the funded project ended.

An emergent theme from the data was the ways in which the personal and professional merged when individuals reflected on and discussed their experiences of care work. Participating in the process appeared to have provided space and opportunities for participants to consider what may have been driving some of their thinking around food:

*It would make us question our habits as adults, not just the children, our rules, our priorities and such like and it has done that! (Catherine)*

*... you know it really has helped me, it's made me think a lot more about my own food memories and some of the things that have been relevant to me as a child, to my own children and some of them have been very very positive and very poignant and some of the haven't been so positive and yes, its kind of raised stuff for me but you know it's helped me be much more reflective. (Karen)*

Participants talked openly about their own childhoods, how their values and beliefs around parenting, childhood, care giving and family life had been shaped. By using the lens of food and food practices, the freedom to explore these often sensitive and challenging aspects of care were made explicit. What *Food for Thought* seemed to allow for was a pace of learning that created small but significant cultural, rather than only individual, changes:

*...there's very subtle cultural shifts that people start to pay attention in slightly different ways ...it's a really quiet ripple that just ripples on and make small kinds of cultural differences. (Hazel)*

### **Application to practice and research**

This small exploratory study aimed to examine the experiences of a wide range of key stakeholders in one knowledge exchange project. By creating space for both academics and

partners to reflect on their participation, the paper has drawn attention to the complexity of partnership based research work and the potential gaps between what might be considered evidenced based practice and community based services.

The data highlights the value of researchers examining the existing context of learning and development that their 'target audience' is operating within. Participants identified the importance of consultation on both the content of resources and more importantly the format that they take. In addition, this study would suggest that both researchers and care providers ought to consider the working environment that staff and carers are working in (Mitton et al. 2007) and the range of learning experiences and approaches that they may have as individuals.

Despite calls to recognise the nuanced nature of practice and the importance of avoiding an oversimplified connection between 'evidence' and 'impact' carers and staff are increasingly expected to underpin their practice with an empirical evidence base drawn from established research and literature (Beddoe 2011). However, as Webb (2001:64) suggests:

*...recent and well documented research ... shows that reasoning strategies even in the face of evidence consistently fail to respect the canons of rationality assumed by an evidence based approach.*

The study confirmed that many carers and staff can feel undermined and overwhelmed rather than enhanced by training and learning opportunities. It has illustrated the importance of researchers linking their work with existing resources, materials or theoretical and conceptual models or interventions that may already be in place rather than presenting their work as 'the answer' somehow disconnected from these others. It seems that most often, the integration of this wide range of training or learning and development is left to the individual to navigate and manage.

The challenge for researchers committed to meaningful knowledge exchange is to effectively communicate a genuine respect for the knowledge and expertise that external partners may bring and to allow for sufficient time and opportunities in research planning for relationships to be established and nurtured. This calls into question the assumption that impact is lineal (Holmwood 2011) rather it requires an openness to a mutual exchange of learning which can best be achieved through investment in time and relationships.

## **Conclusion**

Knowledge exchange projects can often be presented as a one-way process whereby academics work with others to transfer knowledge and thus inform practice (Davis et al. 2008). By contrast, our experience was that the opportunity for joint working was transformative for many of the academics and practitioners involved. There was a rich exchange of differing views, values and experiences which resulted in foster and residential carers being integral to the development of a suite of resources and tools designed to help in the further care of looked after children. Central to this were the reflections on the local and national policies concerning food and food practices and how such reflections allowed practice standards and approaches to become embedded and immediate rather than abstract and removed from the day-to-day care being delivered.

The *Food for Thought* project began as an attempt to translate academic research findings into useful tools for practice. However, by engaging with direct providers of such practice, the complexity of knowledge exchange, learning cultures, personal and professional values and care relationships were explored at far greater depth than much previous research has considered. The technical-rationale competency based approach to practice belies the ‘..messy, non-linear and often serendipitous’ (Smith et al. 2013:2) nature of social work and social care. Nowhere is this more keenly felt than by those who care day to day, hour to hour and minute by minute for children and young people looked after away from home.

Perhaps with the rise of a risk averse discourse around caring for children, foster carers and residential staff have been under pressure to provide straightforward, measureable care. This is often at the expense of their own, and the children’s, needs and rights (Houston and Griffiths 2000). Carers have become increasingly concerned with being seen to be coping, with minimal support, following standardised policy and procedure and demonstrating a clinical level of competence. However, what became clear during this particular knowledge exchange process was that by using food as a safe metaphor, carers were able to share and express a range of powerful emotions and experiences. Uniquely, the reality of care as relational rather than instrumental was clearly demonstrated, as were the feelings that such care engendered. Carers and staff talked about feeling repulsed, repelled, in love, lost, hopeful, challenged, furious in their care work, all within the confines of a learning space that promoted choices about self-disclosure, group learning and trust.

Oreszczyn et al. (2014) argue that if the research team is placed within the system and works with people who are also part of that system to develop ideas or resources then learning and reflection can be made to continue once the researcher[s] leaves. This paper has shown that this was indeed the case in relation to the *Food for Thought* study. However, traditionally far less attention has been given to the parallel academic learning and reflection on the research process and on the reality of generating knowledge exchange work. This paper has highlighted that securing interest in the topic and respecting the expertise of those involved in the application and integration of the 'new knowledge' is vital. For us, the focus on food played a crucial role in breaking down typical hierarchies of 'expert/academic' versus 'practitioner/lay knowledge' and allowed for an exchange of forms of knowledge that, whilst by no means entirely harmonious, added an authenticity and immediate relevance to the project which could impact on the day to day care of children. Thus, food policy and standards became a useful sounding board and bench mark rather than a set of 'rules' to be followed and applied.

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