
Professional activity and professional identity: A cultural-historical investigation into change and transformation in Children's Services

Dr Paul Wiseman
Senior Lecturer Educational Studies
University of Wolverhampton
p.wiseman@wlv.ac.uk
01902 323375

Abstract

This paper presents the findings of a quasi-longitudinal investigation of the lived experiences of Children's Service professionals between 2004 and 2012. The aim of the research was to gain an understanding of the factors which shape and transform professional activity. Data collection was undertaken using semi-structured interviews and Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) was used as the analytical framework. The findings of the research surfaced a number of tensions that were evident within Children's Services. These included the limited role that government policy took in shaping professional activity together with the need for senior managers to translate national policy into localised practice via clearly articulated strategic vision; as well as the need to develop new 'Council' rules to promote new ways of working. The findings also challenged the concept of a stable 'community of practice' as proposed by Lave and Wenger and supported Vygotsky's notion that learning is underpinned by discontinuity, conflict and displacement. Engestrom's concepts of historicity and multi-voicedness also proved to be particularly applicable to the process of change that took place in and between both phases of the research.

Key words

Children's Services, policy, learning, change, activity theory, neoliberalism

Introduction

The research presented within this article is the result of an investigation that took place over an eight year period as I attempted to explore two separate and distinct phases within the recent history of Children's Services (in England). Using Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) as the analytical framework I hoped to gain understanding of factors which shape professional behaviour or what, seen through

the lens of CHAT, I have referred to as professional ‘activity’. The findings of the research present a temporal and situated analysis of everyday working practices during periods of structural and functional change. It follows a quasi – longitudinal structure, in that it is based upon studies of Children’s Service professionals in 2004; studies of professionals working in the same organisations in 2012; and a comparison of the two. The longitudinal design of the research enabled identification of consistencies and disparities, stability and transformation, in order to clarify what did and did not facilitate change and how professionals experienced shifts in professional activity and identity.

The rationale for the study

The need for a better understanding of professional activity within reconfigured Children’s Services is highlighted by Warmington (2009, p.85), who states that “professionals find themselves located in complex, vertiginous settings in which individual and collective practices are undergoing radical transformation that necessitates new learning and knowledge creation”. He believes that there is a general underestimation of the “qualitative changes” needed in professional activity with government policy and related literature failing to capture “the landscape of emerging practice” (Warmington, 2009, p.85). Holland et al (2008) also highlight the importance that periods of transition, such as the ones identified within this study, have for researchers interested in collective behaviour, arguing that it is during these periods of “upheavals, uncertainties, and challenges” that the “dialogic dynamics of collective identity are most apparent” (Holland et al, 2008, p.100). By examining the changes that occurred between 2004 and 2012, I hoped to capture a changing professional landscape, and gain insight into the mechanisms involved in the transformation of professional activity; one of which was the dynamic and fluid policy context that was evident throughout the period of the research.

The policy context

In 2004 the UK was still in the middle of a thirteen year Labour administration that rode on a putative economic boom, managed by an ‘iron chancellor’. The New Labour government’s social democratic credentials were in large part predicated upon its children and families policy (it renamed the Department of Education and Skills, the Department of Children, Schools and Families) and initiated the Every Child Matters agenda). In 2012 the UK, like much of the west, struggled in the aftermath of a global financial crash; one of the consequences of which was reduced welfare provision (Hutton, 2011). The UK was then governed by a Conservative-

Liberal Democrat coalition concerned with cutting the deficit through austerity policies that included an increasingly marketised, managerial model for the public sector. The professional environment of these two dates was therefore very different and it is necessary to examine what lay at the heart of New Labour's and the Con-Lib Coalition children's services policy.

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

The 2004 Act required all local authorities, within in England, to work with statutory and non-statutory agencies as part of the new Children's Trust (DfES, 2004) arrangements and introduced a range of new powers which required agencies to share information in order that they could jointly plan and commission services in order that each local authority could achieve the Every Child Matter's: Five Outcomes (DfES, 2003) for all children and young people. The Five Outcomes are listed below.

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

The challenge of achieving these outcomes was seen by Edwards (2004, p.83) as requiring "radical changes" in order to create "new ways of thinking about professional practices". In particular, they were seen to require an integrated, holistic, wrap-around conception of services working with children and families.

The White Paper; Your child, your schools, our future: building a 21st century schools system reiterated the Labour government's commitment to the 'joined up' working within Children's Services (with schools at the hub) however following the

election of the Conservative-LibDem coalition government in May 2010 many of the initiatives and structures which were introduced by the previous administration came to an end and a new era for Children's Services began. These were articulated within "The Department for Education Business Plan" (DfE, 2010), which was put into statute via the 2011 Education Act, and identified its new set of priorities for children and young people. These being:

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

These priorities are markedly different to the "Five Outcomes" identified within the Children Act of 2004 and refocused resources on schools rather than the rights of the individual child. Another notable feature of the 2010 business plan (DfE, 2010) was the change in the role of the local authority which was seen as "shifting from managing maintained provision to one of strategic commissioner" (DfE, 2010) in which the local authority was the champion for educational excellence and advocate for vulnerable children. This re-conceptualisation of the role of the local authority was accompanied by a significant change in focus as to the form and function of services for children and young people. The holistic, integrated approach to the provision of services that was evident in 2004 was replaced with a focus upon schools and schooling (DfE, 2010) within a world of recession and funding cuts. Buras et al (2012) however suggest that the global economic crisis created an opportunity for governments to use the concept of austerity in order to introduce neoliberal reforms which challenge our traditional understanding of the relationship between the state and public sector. This viewpoint is supported by Levitas who states; "The discourse of cuts and austerity that accompany 2010 is a neoliberal shock doctrine providing an excuse for further appropriation of social resources by the rich" (Levitas, 2012, p. 322). Levitas therefore believes that the term austerity has become a "justifying mantra for the coalition economic and social policy" (Levitas, 2012, p. 322) which can be seen to be supported by the budget of July 2015 which refocussed its attention on minimising the size of the state and rewarding those in employment.

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

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

The Conservative-LibDem coalition government that was elected in 2010 can be seen to have continued this neoliberal agenda of reform by introducing the concept of the ‘Big Society’. The coalition furthered reform of local government (and

governance) structure within England through the abolition of monitoring bodies such as the Audit Commission and the introduction of the Localism Act (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012; DfE, 2011). This reform agenda has its roots within a neoliberalist desire to reduce the size of the ‘state’ and increase the role that civil society plays. This model envisages civil society (in the form of individual initiative, the private sector, the third sector) filling the gaps left by the reduction in the size and power of the state machinery and creating new ways of addressing social exclusion (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012). However Lowndes and Pratchett believe that the coalition governments drive towards ‘localism’, as defined within the Localism Act (DfE, 2011), was arguably been derailed due to the “political expediency of the budget cuts” (2012, p22) that were required at a time of public sector austerity.

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

The manner in which the policy discourse outlined above has impacted, and continues to impact, upon the professional practice of those who work within Children’s Services, is a particular focus of this research and I now turn my attention towards Cultural Historical Activity Theory and other theoretical perspective (CHAT) as a means of gaining such insight into the factors which influence and shape professional activity.

Methodology

Analytical framework

One of the key challenges for the research was in trying to define ‘professional behaviour’ and also in deciding how this could be identified and assessed. In order to achieve this I drew heavily upon CHAT (Cole, 1996) which offered a way of defining behaviour and also a framework which would help structure data collection and analysis. CHAT is embedded in a European “tradition of thought” (Martin and

Peim, 2009, p.131) which originated in the USSR; through the work of Lev Vygotsky (Cole et al, 1997; Daniels, 2004, 2005; Edwards and Daniels, 2004; and Kozulin, 1986). Socio-cultural activity theory (SCAT), although closely aligned to CHAT, is “informed by North American traditions of anthropology, interactionism and pragmatism of the adaptable self” (Martin and Peim, 2009, p.131). While both perspectives share common theoretical origins and conceptualise “learning and development as mediated processes” (Daniels, 2004, p.121); there have been debates over the differences in their appropriation of Vygotsky and the extent to which they comprise distinct approaches (Daniels, 2004; Martin and Peim, 2009). In short, however, SCAT is seen as encompassing a range of different theoretical perspectives which focus upon semiotic mediation with a particular focus on speech. CHAT, on the other hand, whilst acknowledging the importance of communication, places ‘activity’ at the centre of its analysis of human behaviour (Cole, 1996). Activity within this theoretical context is seen to be “a specific form of the societal existence of humans consisting of purposeful changing of natural and social reality” (as cited in Engeström et al, 1999, p.39) and gives insight into why the research focuses upon ‘professional activity’ rather than ‘professional practice’. Despite these differences “both approaches attempt to theorise and provide methodological tools for investigating the processes by which social, cultural and historical factors shape human functioning” (Daniels, 2004, p.121) and therefore seem particularly appropriate for this study.

In the past thirty years Yrjö Engeström has pioneered the work of CHAT and established it as a research tool with which to study organisational and professional learning. Engeström’s development of CHAT has utilised aspects of Vygotsky’s work by using “collective, artefact mediated and object orientated activity” (Engeström, 2001, p.135) as a minimum unit of analysis for understanding workplace behaviour. His innovations in activity theory focus upon the dynamics between: the subjects (actors) within a given activity, the object that is the focus of their activity and the tools through which their work on the object is mediated. Subject, tool and object are therefore understood in relation to each other and to the rules, division of labour and communities in which the activity is embedded; which he refers to as an “Activity System” (Engeström, 1999, p.26) (See fig. 1).

In order for Engeström (1999) to capture the dynamic nature of human behaviour within this rigid framework Engeström identifies principles which underpin his concept of an activity system. These principles attempt to clarify the motivations behind human behaviour, and therefore professional activity and help illustrate and

explain the way in which the object may be transformed over time and the activity system experience change. “Historicity” is one such principle and is seen by Engeström (2001, p.135) as connecting past and present action, primarily, through the use of language and is seen as something which underlies all professional behaviour by shaping the context in which all activity is acted out. Behaviour in this respect is seen as the result of human social evolution in which both the language that is used and the actions that are carried out are shaped and affected by previous human experience. “Multi-voicedness” (Engeström, 2001, p.135) is another concept, introduced by Engeström, which recognises diversity in the collective. It implies that, through the articulation of competing voices, within a specific social context, certain contradictions and tensions may manifest themselves which, through the different object motives they elicit in their interpretation of the object, will motivate and transform behaviour and ultimately the activity system itself (Cole et al, 1997). Contradictions are therefore seen to be central to systemic learning. It is a perspective which is also recognised by Holland et al (2008, p.100) who state that “multiple discourses and versions of self are crucial in the cultural production of collective identities”. Contradictions are seen to exist within all systems when old rules or patterns of practice are used to work on new objects. Engeström (2001) however, sees contradictions and tensions, such as this, as potential sources of change, development and transformation. These tensions are not therefore seen as features but are in fact structural tensions which exist within and between activity systems which if surfaced and resolved are the energy behind learning and organisational transformation and are a particular focus of the analysis of data within this thesis.

Lave and Wenger (1991) however see learning and transformation within organisations differently to Engestrom and present ‘participation’ as the central feature of the learning process; as knowledge is passed from one generation of worker to the next. This takes place from expert to novice in a subtle process of “learning by peripheral participation” (Lave and Wenger, 1999, p.23) in which all aspects of the professional culture are communicated from older to newer members of the professional community. Lave and Wenger identify a “community of practice” rather than an activity system as a unit of analysis in which “participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities” (Lave and Wenger, 1999, p.23). They portray an image of professional practices which are relatively static, stable and cohesive, and changed generationally through gradual transformations of work practices rather than the much more dynamic approach portrayed by Engeström in which

transformation is placed at the heart of the learning process. Lave and Wenger (1999) therefore present us with a theory of learning which is bounded by notions of professional identity and status and sees learning and the transformation of practice taking place in a slow and deliberate manner brought about by generational changes in practice.

Social identity theory (SIT) (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) presents another perspective in which we can investigate the motives behind professional behaviour within organisations. SIT suggests that professionals within large organisation, such as a local authority, develop a “self-concept” (*ibid*, 1989, p22) which is a combination of their own personal and social identity which is influenced greatly by the organisational context within which they belong. Ashforth and Mael suggest that it is “the prevailing values, strategy and system of authority” (1989, p22), which they associate with, that influences their sense of self and as a result influences their professional behaviour. However due to the size of many large organisations this relational influence can be seen to emanate from the sub units within the organisation that they belong to rather than the prevailing government policy and/or organisational strategy.

Data Collection

The research was undertaken within the Children’s Service portfolio of a local authority located within the West Midlands region of England. The first round of data collection took place just as the 2004 Children Act was implemented. The second round of data collection took place in the same local authority eight years later, in 2012; during another period of change and transformation. However, the change that took place in 2012 was not as a result of investment or governmental policy ambitions but was as a result of a range of austerity measures (Biressi and Nunn, 2014; Evans, 2012) introduced by the Coalition Government, following the election of May 2010. The Conservative – Liberal Democrat coalition was among those European governments that argued the need to implement austerity measures, in response to the global economic crisis. These measures included wide-ranging welfare cuts and reductions in both central and local government spending (Rapoport and Gerts, 2010).

The selected local authority employed over four thousand people when the research began; there was therefore a need to establish the bounds of my particular case study within the context of this authority. I needed to select a sample that reflected

the diverse range of practitioners that worked with children and young people under the newly introduced Children's Trust arrangements. I also wanted to select a balance of practitioners from both strategic and operational roles. I eventually decided to use the Children's Fund Management Board to delineate my case as this was made up of professionals who worked for a variety of different agencies and Council portfolios; including senior strategic managers and those in operational roles. After seeking informed consent for their participation I was left with nine participants. The job roles (rather than job titles) of the participants in both phases of the research are listed in table 1 below

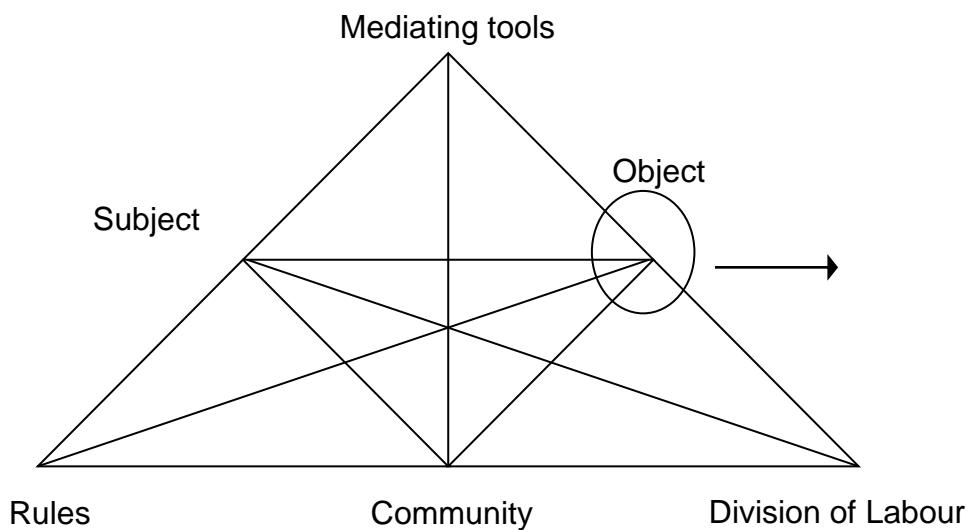
Table 1: Research Participants

2004 (Phase 1)	2012 (Phase 2)
Director of Voluntary Services	Director of the Council for Voluntary Services
Head of Integrated Children's Services	Assistant Director for Children's Services
Head of Children's Social Care	Senior Manager for specialist Children's Services
Primary Headteacher	Primary Headteacher
Member of the Children's Arts team	Member of the Children's Arts team
Breakfast Club Coordinator	Study Support Manager
Looked after Children's Worker	Integrated Service Manager
Children's Participation Worker	Leisure Facilities Manager
Youth and Community Worker	Youth and Community Worker

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews with eighteen individual stakeholders (Nine within phase one and phase two of the research) and involved individuals who worked within all sectors of the Children's Service environment. The interview schedule used categories evident within an activity system (Engeström et

al, 1999) to help structure the interview and also allowed for an appropriate comparison of findings within and across both phases of the data collection. An activity system identifies six categories which influence the actions and behaviour of individuals within a given context (*ibid*) and can be used as a unit of analysis for the study of collective behaviour. An activity system and its associated categories are presented in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1: The structure of a human activity system



Key findings of the research

How then has the policy context outlined earlier impacted upon the professional activity for those involved within Children's Services? The following section presents the perspectives of practitioners that have lived and worked through the two phases of the research and reviews the differences and similarities that existed between the two dates before identifying what can be learnt from this comparison of professional activity in 2004 and 2012.

Differences in professional activity (2004 and 2012)

In 2004 there was considerable uncertainty and confusion as to the concept of a 'Children's Trust' which had been introduced as part of the Children Act (2004). This uncertainty was accompanied by concern as to the implications that 'trust status' would have for the social identity (cf. Ashforth & Mael, 1989) of the professionals involved. In 2012 however, following another period of reorganisation, practitioners

seemed to have a much clearer understanding of the new Children's Service structure. The Council had therefore changed from being a highly complex and fragmented work environment to one which was much smaller with a much clearer identity.

This clarity of purpose can be seen to have helped define a community of practice (cf. Lave and Wenger, 1999) within Children's Services through the articulation of a well-received strategic plan. This is very different to 2004 where senior strategic managers were struggling to come to terms with a new professional landscape and therefore unable to create a clear strategic vision. Despite this clarity of purpose in 2012, the Council is no longer seen as having the dominance it enjoyed in 2004 with schools and other agencies, such as the voluntary sector, becoming a much more prominent force within the Children's Service environment. Another difference that was evident is the business-like language that was being adopted by those who work for the Council in 2012. This is far removed from the language of 2004 which had a much more philanthropic overtone and focused around the concepts of prevention, partnership and participation. The emphasis upon working in partnership; a particular feature of activity in 2004 following recommendations of the Laming Report (2003), was seen by the Head of Integrated Children's Services (in 2004) as being of particular importance. She stated;

"if we are to improve the quality of services in our neighbourhoods then the first thing we need to do is make sure that all the service providers within a particular area are all singing the same hymn sheet."

In 2004 the concept of partnership working was promoted by the aspirations of national policy and was seen as a revolutionary form of professional activity. However it can be seen to have a much different interpretation in 2012 where it was seen as an essential element of everyday practice due to the demands that practitioners faced as a result of shrinking financial and human resources. The Every Child Matters: Green Paper (DfES, 2003) could therefore be seen to have initiated the transformation that was needed to develop the current joined up approach to the delivery of Children's Services. Another difference between the two phases of the research is the clear "customer focus" that exists within the Council in 2012, which again, seems at odds with the more benevolent approach evident in 2004. The reference to "*customers*" has become part of professional vocabulary and relates specifically to the new business-like language which is seen, in 2012, to

conceptualise service users as a potential source of much (needed income) rather than as a client group 'in need'. The reason behind the adoption of a more business minded approach is highlighted by the Integrated Service Manager (2012), who states: "*The chief exec's looking to bring someone in with a business background we need to be much sharper and business focused because we've got less money*".

This move towards commercialisation seems very much at odds with the earlier ambitions of Every Child Matters which was rooted in social justice for all. The strategic focus of the Council could therefore be seen to have changed from one which purported to focus upon universal access to one that now adopts the language, if not the practice, of commercial business. The focus upon; prevention, partnership and participation therefore seems to have been replaced by one which focuses upon accountability and efficiency as a direct response to the central government funding cuts which has seen investment in Children's Services fall so dramatically. However, despite the funding cuts that have taken place, none of those interviewed seemed bitter over the changes; with practitioners viewing the previous Children's Service structure as being inefficient and ineffective. This is in contrast to provision in 2012 whereby the Assistant Director has been seen to create a structure which avoided duplication and maximised efficiency via the newly formed 'Family Connect' service; a hub for all children and family related services. The mistakes that took place in 2004 are acknowledged by the Assistant Director for Children and Families. He states:

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

The Council can therefore be seen to have redefined itself from an organisation that once dominated Children's Services to one that now serves a specific commissioning role within an increasingly fragmented and less bounded public service environment. The restructuring that took place in 2011 has also created a range of new occupations with wider job remits as a result of the reduction in staffing levels. The rationalisation of the Council in 2012, together with a reduction in the number of national policy directives, has also facilitated a move away from a

centralised governance model which has allowed more decisions to be made on a local level. This shift to a more localised decision making process seems to have created a need for practitioners to have a more flexible and adaptable approach to work. Despite this need for the modern Children's Service professional to be entrepreneurial and possess increased flexibility there is now tension between this desire and the traditional rules, regulations and processes by which the Council functions. Historicity and multi-voicedness (cf. Engestrom, 2001) are therefore dominant forces in the Council's desire for change and transformation. The tension that exists between flexibility and the bureaucracy evident within the Council perhaps highlights why the voluntary sector is now seen to be thriving during a period of national austerity as they are quick to respond to national and local need because of their independence and lack of regulation. In contrast bureaucracy can be seen to pervade the work of local authority based Children's Service practitioners in both phases of the research. These traditional working practices predate the Children Act (2004) and can be seen as a historical legacy of previous profession generations which can now be seen as actively preventing the development of new innovative entrepreneurial practice: a Council priority. The frustration this creates is captured in the extract below from an interview with the leisure facilities manager in 2012.:

"I can only speak on a commercial base; it's like smashing a round peg into a square hole. Policies and procedures that the Council run or adhere to are generally based on office workers. There's all sorts of anomalies that go on but yet you still have to achieve your targets that you're set by the council".

Despite the general confusion and duplication that the introduction of the 2004 Children Act created it was seen by a number of professionals as providing much needed support and opportunities for all children and young people across the authority. This universal support has now gone as the Council moves from a universal to a targeted approach for children and families who are in most need and raises an important question; as to what has happened to those children and young people who fall just short of being defined as "most in need" and to the ambitions of making Every Child Matter?

Similarities in professional activity between 2004 -2012

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

that existed for strategic and operational practitioners early in the change process is similar. During both periods practitioners became concerned over the implications that the proposed change had for themselves, individually. Each interviewee therefore had a unique experience of the change process in relation to their personal and social identity (cf. Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Policy ambitions were therefore individually interpreted and became less generic as they were applied to a particular subunit within which a practitioner worked. The response to change in both years is therefore seen to be an individual phenomenon with the new professional approach being individually interpreted, defined and created.

This individualised response to the demands of the changing policy context is evident throughout strategic and operational layers of Children's Services and in both periods the newly appointed senior managers could be seen to go through a learning process in which they attempted to come to terms with the new professional environment. Both sets of senior managers can therefore be seen to be trying to develop coherent structures which attempt to support, coordinate and communicate this philosophy to all of those working within Children's Services rather than looking at specific models of service delivery. Practitioners, in both phases of the research, are also seen to ignore certain aspects of national policy which they do not individually value or deem important and therefore develop a form of collective identity (Holland et al, 2008). This is particularly evident in the focus that the 2004 Act placed upon the participation of children and young people within the decision making process of Children's Services which was not embraced or adopted by any practitioners in 2004 and is non-existent in 2012. It is also evident in the proposed involvement of the voluntary sector which was never embedded into practice in 2004 and again is non-existent in 2012. Practitioners can therefore be seen to select aspects of national policy which they view as worthy of implementation and which they view as not. A similar pattern could also be seen to exist in the way that certain professional skills are valued at different times depending upon the overriding professional culture. This can be seen across the two periods and is identified in the 'rise and fall' of roles such as children's participation workers, integrated service managers, study support managers and currently with employees with proven income generation skills.

Another feature of professional practice however, that has remained of significant importance is the need for agencies belonging to different agencies to work in partnership with each other for the good of all vulnerable children and young people. Partnership working therefore is not only seen as a strategic ambition but can be

seen to be established as a feature of everyday practice. Despite embracing partnership working in this way it is somewhat surprising to find the voluntary sector remaining 'outside' of the Council structure, throughout both phases of the research, with neither the voluntary or statutory sector agencies showing any desire to work together. There also remains a general lack of awareness of the aims and objectives of 'other' professionals and agencies in both 2004 and 2012. This lack of awareness is evident throughout the layers of Children's Services; from senior strategic positions to those who are much more operationally focussed and is possibly explained by the traditional hierarchical management systems which remain in place and prevent the full integration of professionals from a range of different agencies and again demonstrate how historical structures and practice continues to influence and shape current provision (c.f Engestrom's, 2001).

Learning lessons from a period of professional transition

The identification of differences and similarities in professional activity identified above provides significant insight into the factors which have been instrumental in influencing aspects of professional activity within and between 2004 and 2012. From this comparison it is possible to identify characteristics of the change process which play a significant role in the transformation of professional activity and may provide useful learning points for professionals involved in similar periods of change. These learning points are presented below.

The need for a simple governance structure and clear strategic vision

Although the 2004 Children Act attempted to change the practice of those who work with children and families it did not give sole authority or responsibility to any individuals to direct or facilitate this change. Instead it created a highly complex environment in which decisions over professional practice either went unmonitored or were made jointly via management boards and other forms of communal governance which did not have the power to directly influence or challenge individual practice. A middle ground can be seen to have been established in an attempt to placate the range of different approaches which were evident within the multi-agency management boards; which did little to transform working practices. In short, it would appear that the clearer the strategic vision is, and the simpler the governance structures the better it can be communicated throughout the organisation and the more purposeful the work within the organisation can become.

The limited impact of funding

Despite the significant difference in investment within the two periods practitioners shared a similar view as to the limited role that time limited funding had on the transformation of professional behaviour. Funding was therefore not seen as something which directly impacted upon or influenced the way practitioners undertook their professional duties. Instead it was simply seen as something which increased the capacity of services that benefitted from it. A change in the philosophy of the organisation was seen to be much more significant and influential.

The limited impact of government policy

Government policy was not seen as being particularly effective in achieving a change in professional activity and, as with funding, it was seen as having a predominantly negative impact once the policy came to an end and a new policy was introduced. This perspective was highlighted by the Director of the Voluntary Services, who stated;

"a policy just allows people to do the bare minimum and escape detection then that's one thing but if we want people to actually transform personally into a much more effective worker then policies don't enable that; they can provide a framework but I believe its inside and that you want to understand families better."

The need to align national policy with local plans

National policy can be at times be seen to conflict with locally developed strategic plans and can therefore prevent a desired transformation in localised professional activity taking place as practitioners have to ensure that both national policy and local ambitions are placated. A middle ground can again be seen to be created.

The need for a 'sense of stability'

Job security is, of course, a major issue for all practitioners and occupied the minds of all of those interviewed. 'Self-promotion' therefore played a significant role in the work of practitioners as they attempted to be 'mainstreamed' (in 2004) or saved from redundancy (in 2012). The limited time span of many of the initiatives also added pressure to demonstrate positive early outcomes in order to "grab the headlines" and ensure job security. This inevitably meant that those who were good at self-

promotion had a higher profile than those who did not, regardless of the effectiveness of their services.

The need for new rules to promote new ways of working

In 2012 the Council can be seen to be adopting a much more focussed and seemingly efficient way of working however traditional forms of bureaucracy can be seen to hinder this development and prevent the adoption of the new customer focused and business orientated approach. Barriers such as this can be seen to have caused frustration for those trying to adopt a more flexible and innovative approach as they had to “waste time” following Council procedure rather than focusing upon their core business objectives. Attention therefore needs to be given to streamlining existing Council systems and protocols to ensure that the local authority can survive in an increasingly dynamic and business minded environment.

Conclusion

Although embedded within a complex theoretical approach the concept of an activity system proved to be a useful unit of measurement for investigating professional behaviour within and across each phase of the research. It allowed the observations made by the research participants, regarding the distinctive features of their work activity, to be examined using the different categories (within an activity system) and different perceptions by different practitioners. It can therefore be seen to avoid a particular concern of Vygotsky (Kozulin, 1986); that of using consciousness to analyse consciousness.

The findings gained from this analysis highlight the unstable nature of professional activity and “social identity” (cf. Ashforth and Mael, 1989) during periods of change and transformation. This uncertainty and confusion is perhaps not surprising, considering the size and complexity of the statutory agencies that were undergoing restructure and challenges Lave and Wenger’s (1999, p.23) concept of a stable and cohesive “community of practice” within Children’s Services. However the confusion evident did seem to resonate with Vygotsky’s (Cole et al, 1997) notion that learning is underpinned by discontinuity, conflict and displacement which was particularly influenced by the processes of “historicity” and “multi-voicedness” (cf. Engestrom, 2001) evident within the Children’s Service activity system. The findings also provide insight into specific features of professional practice within Children’s Services and the political nature of professional identity. In particular, professionals in 2012 can be seen to need a very different skills set to those that were required in

2004 with 'Entrepreneurship' becoming of increasing importance as well as a need for frontline staff to embrace a much wider and often more demanding job specification. Despite this focus upon a more business orientated approach to their work; the rules that practitioners have to follow can often be seen to become the object of their work related activity. Practitioners can therefore be seen to focus upon doing what they have to do rather than focus upon what needs to be done; a significant difference. Rules, that practitioners follow, must therefore be flexible enough to allow practitioners to achieve the primary object of their work related activity; the care and welfare of children and young people.

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Table 1: Research Participants

2004 (Phase 1)	2012 (Phase 2)
Director of Voluntary Services	Director of the Council for Voluntary Services
Head of Integrated Children's Services	Assistant Director for Children's Services
Head of Children's Social Care	Senior Manager for specialist Children's Services
Primary Headteacher	Primary Headteacher
Member of the Children's Arts team	Member of the Children's Arts team
Breakfast Club Coordinator	Study Support Manager
Looked after Children's Worker	Integrated Service Manager
Children's Participation Worker	Leisure Facilities Manager
Youth and Community Worker	Youth and Community Worker

Figure 1: The structure of a human activity system

