Developing the role of schools as research organisations: the Sunfield experience

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We are entering a new phase in learning about childhood disabilities. While we have found out much of what we need to know about their causes and aetiology, solutions to many of the challenges we will face in the future will come from the evidence base held by practitioners. Practitioners are ideally placed to carry out 'real world' research but they often need support in carrying out setting-based enquiry. In this article, Barry Carpenter, Chief Executive and Director of Research at Sunfield, discusses the relationship between academic and practitioner research and the role of practitioners as researchers. He goes on to explore the development of a research culture in special schools, focusing on Sunfield, a residential special school for children with severe and complex learning disabilities. Barry Carpenter shows how research projects at Sunfield have generated evidence which has guided the school's development. The inter-disciplinary approach adopted in this setting has encouraged involvement in research from many staff in diverse professions throughout the school.

Key words: special schools, research, staff, involvement, interdisciplinary approach.

The changing focus of research

As professionals, we are entering a new phase in learning about childhood disabilities. We have found out much of what we need to know about their causes and aetiology. Michael Guralnick (2004) observes that: 'We now know so much about childhood disability that we must move to second generation research. This must be practitioner-led and evidence-based.' With such a shift in research focus, the answers to many of the challenges posed by the changing pattern of childhood disability (Carpenter, 2005) will come from the evidence base held by practitioners. The General Teaching Council for England (GTCE, 2004) encourages practitioners to: 'Create, interpret, share and rigorously evaluate practical evidence about teaching and learning in and for different contexts.'

They argue further (GTCE, 2006) that research enquiry aims to solve problems by achieving deeper understanding. Our professional knowledge will depend upon our observations of young people in the context of our work with them and our academically informed analyses of those observations. This approach will require us to 'understand the new challenges and change in order to go forward' (Short, 2004). If we, in our varying professions, do not continue to change to meet the needs of the children and young people we serve, then our schools, and the pedagogy they employ, will become obsolete.

The relationship between academic and practitioner research

Frequently, academics perceive practitioner research as lacking rigour and practitioners view much academic research as impracticable. However, the relationship between academic and practitioner research is symbiotic in two ways. The first is that practitioner research offers a context in which existing academic theory can be tested (translational research; Shirley, 2005) so that its 'real life' impact, day-to-day, for a young person with a special need or disability can be assessed. Rose (2002) notes that:

> 'Teachers are more likely to participate in classroom-based inquiry when they perceive that this will have benefits to their own practice and to the needs of the pupils in their classrooms.'
>
> (p. 46)

The second is that new ideas and concepts can emerge from a foundation of existing good practice and theory (GTCE, 2004) and these can then be investigated by academics for a wider population of young people. Both Rose and Grosvenor (2001) and Kershner and Chaplin (2001) have cited examples of teacher research projects that have increased understanding of methods, approaches, teaching and learning in a variety of different special needs settings. Additionally Watkins (2006), in a statement that can apply equally well to practitioners from other disciplines, postulates that:

> 'Only through developing opportunities for teachers to research their own personal conceptions of what special needs education is – and isn't – will the wider educational community really move forward in its thinking.'
>
> (p. 17)

With the comparatively recent emphasis on researchers' accountability to the subjects of their study, the effective application of research to professional practice has become an increasingly important ethical consideration and resonates with the seminal message first articulated by Stenhouse (1981).

Practitioners as researchers

It is easy for practitioners to become overawed by the concept of research and to perceive it as a lofty, academic concern removed from their own activity. However, as Whitehead (cited in Shepherd, 2004; see also Whitehead & Hartley, 2005) states: 'Research . . . is not distant from practice, but its lifeblood. It feeds the cycle of reflection/evidence/evaluation/teaching and learning. It's what excellent teachers do.' The practitioner working with a child or young person with special educational needs is the means by which research – carried out by both academics and other practitioners – can make a difference to their daily lives. This has been ably demonstrated through a whole series of articles promoted by journals serving the field of special educational needs (see *Support for Learning*, volume 21). These articles expound creative, insightful approaches which ultimately enhance the quality of learning for children and the effectiveness of teaching for teachers (Doveston & Keenaghan, 2006; Johnson, 2006).

Practitioners, while ideally placed to carry out 'real world' research (Robson, 2002), often need support in carrying out setting-based enquiry (Roberts-Holmes, 2005). This may be in structuring the research so that it meets important academic criteria – for example, justification, rigour, dissemination, recognition of participant rights (Porter & Lacey, 2004). It may also require organisational solutions to the practical issues of time and staffing. Action research models have contributed greatly to bringing clarity to this process (Zuber-Skerritt, 1989)

Developments at Sunfield School

An evolving service

At Sunfield, a 52-week, residential special school for young people with profound autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) and complex needs, there is a need to plan ahead and to explore new ways of intervening in order to improve life for the continually changing generations of young people with severe/complex learning disabilities and their families. The school's capacity to be a responsive organisation, offering high quality services that are underpinned by a sound evidence base and a dynamic research process, is crucial to both its future children and its current children's futures. The school needs to enable staff to be responsive in developing approaches that will be innovative, dynamic and, at times, ground-breaking to meet the learning needs of the children and young people.

Practitioner research is a dynamic process owned by all staff working with young people and families. From their different perspectives comes a greater appreciation of specific contextual detail and its implications for the young people. All have a contribution to make to transdisciplinary research along a continuum of involvement. Including practitioners who have traditionally been excluded from research – for example, school dinner ladies (Smith, 2002) and catering staff (Sunfield Nutrition Research Project) – within a research context brings insight from alternative perspectives which can address problematic elements of research design and add value to the cumulative evidence base.

The perspectives of families and young people in the research context are also vital and address the aim of seamless support for the young person. In a recent piece of research undertaken by Carpenter, Conway and Whitehurst (2005), members of a Parent Advisory Group were involved in the analysis of interview transcripts which explored other parents' experiences of induction to Sunfield. In another piece of work, Sunfield's Student Council carried out their own enquiry into the school's Mission Statement and what everyone thought of it (Ross, Kelly, Lee & Pearson, 2003). They found out that some of the students could not read the symbols used and therefore they decided that the best way of embodying what Sunfield stood for was a photograph of a cross-section of familiar people who made up the Sunfield community.

Supporting the research process

The trustees and senior management team at Sunfield deemed that the development of its provision in the school would be reliant upon the answers and insights that staff generated from their research endeavour and practice-based evidence through enquiry. Thus the assimilation of research as a dimension of work-related practice that generated evidence for evaluation and future development became essential.

At Sunfield, there are many professionals who come from evidence-based disciplines (for example, from care, therapies, education or psychology) who, in the course of their work, look for outcomes that will benefit young people, families and staff. Sunfield evolved an effective model of transdisciplinary practice in which collaborative teamwork was an embedded feature (Carpenter, Chatwin & Egerton, 2001). Upon this platform, a fundamentally transdisciplinary research approach was developed and this has been successfully trialled in reported research projects (Carpenter, Conway & Whitehurst, 2005; Whitehurst & Howells, 2006; Logan, Cowley, Winstanley & Gallivan, 2005). A recent project focusing on nutrition for young people with ASD involved a chef from the catering department as a key player in the research process, alongside teachers, care workers, therapists and support staff.

Acknowledging that practitioner-led research should not be equated with an approach that is tardy, ad hoc and unsubstantiated, Sunfield sought to adhere to a robust research process, identified by Porter and Lacey (2004) as one which:

- has integrity;
- is rigorous;
- is well-planned;
- is carefully executed;
- is meticulously reported;
- is transparent;
- is ethical.

Recognising the importance of the efficacy of research carried out in the school, senior managers and trustees ring-fenced money in the school's budget to support the

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appointment of a research officer who would be able to develop and guide research within the school. This development was underpinned by the formulation of a Research Policy. Its aims and objectives (see Figure 1) constitute the framework within which the research officer operates and its stated aims and objectives provide criteria against which research proposals can be evaluated.

Currently, the governance, policy and research development instituted by Sunfield with the aim of supporting its staff in becoming flexible practitioners include:

- *A research policy* – Sunfield's research policy is not lofty. It was drawn up in consultation with staff engaged in research, including those studying for National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) at Level III.
- *Training* – Sunfield's Professional Development Centre offers a wide range of professional courses which give an opportunity for participants to reflect on present practice and gain new knowledge.
- *Literature* – Sunfield's lending library is continually updated with new publications and also has a selection of journals; these provide a resource to inform practice and support research.
- *The publications brochure* – This is a useful reference for all staff, particularly new staff who want background information on projects. It also serves as an ongoing means of dissemination to interested practitioners in other organisations.
- *A specialist research post* – Sunfield has developed the post of research officer to provide specialist

research support for the institution and the staff.
- *Opportunities for dissemination (internal)* – In addition to contributing to external professional journals, Sunfield has an Innovations Forum where staff who have been carrying out research present it to the rest of the staff; research is also disseminated through Research Briefing Sheets.
- *Opportunities for dissemination (external)* – Staff are encouraged to write up their work for external professional journals, to submit papers to conferences and, where appropriate, to deliver external training.
- *The Research Institute* – This was founded by Sunfield's trustees in January 2005 in acknowledgement of the fact that working with a population of young people who have severe and complex learning disabilities and a changing pattern of need requires creative exploration and adaptation of existing approaches.
- *Research Working Group and individual project management groups* – These groups provide the opportunity for overview, discussion, support and constructive feedback from critical friends.
- *Sunfield's Research and Ethics Group* – This group is chaired by a trustee. The group evaluates staff research applications to make sure that they comply with its criteria for ethical research.
- *Sunfield Research Institute Strategic Management Group* – This group is also chaired by a trustee. The group ensures that the aims and objectives of current and future research remain responsive to the changing population need.

Figure 1: Excerpt from Sunfield's Research Policy: aims and objectives
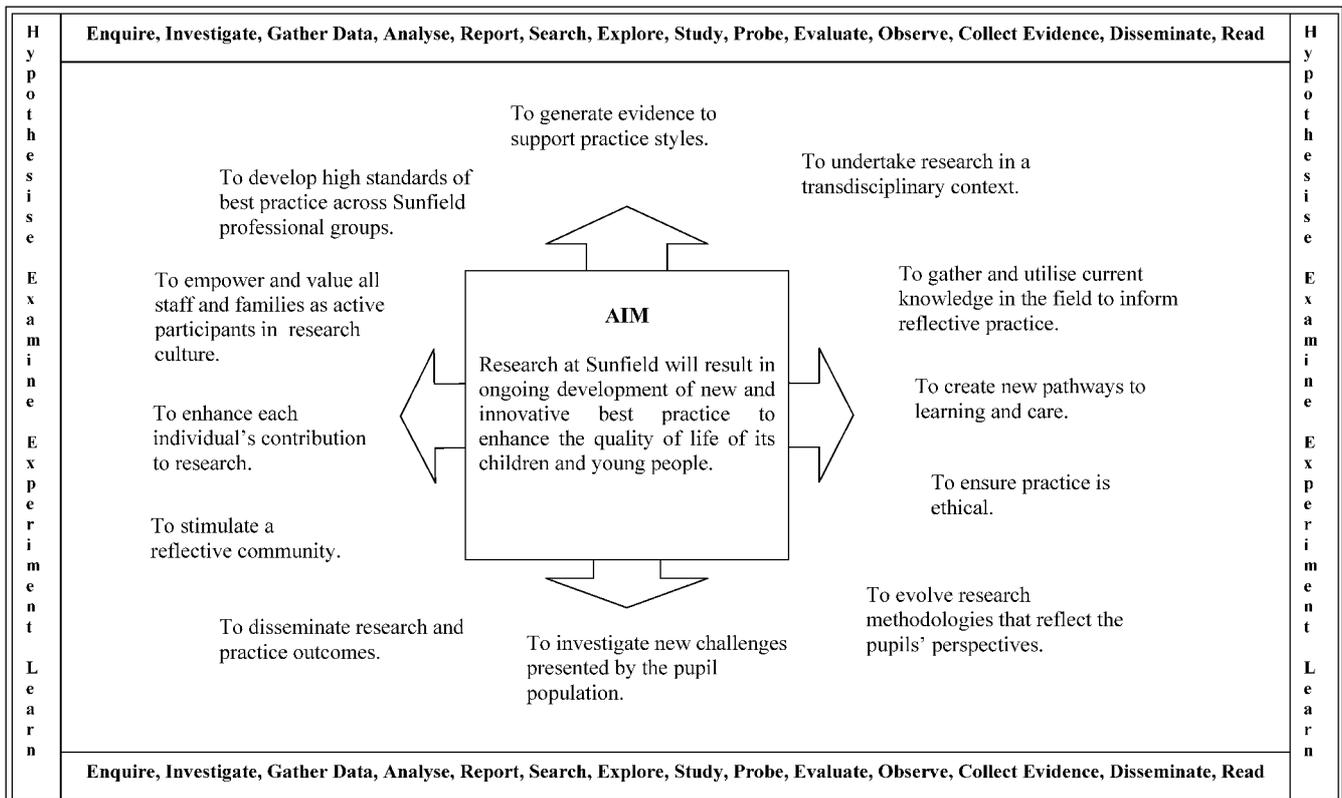
Raising research consciousness

Many members of staff at Sunfield engage with some form of small-scale research in their study towards NVQs or a Foundation Degree in Learning Support. During a research awareness-raising exercise conducted with several staff groups at Sunfield prior to undertaking their research module, they were simply asked, *'What do you think we mean by research?'* The words generated by staff often varied according to their work-related perspective (see Figure 1) but all were descriptors of facets of the research process, for example:

- enquire;
- investigate;
- examine;
- probe;
- evaluate;
- hypothesise;
- observe;
- disseminate;
- search;
- collect evidence;
- report.

Most staff have an idea of what research means to them, but may feel that it is removed from their experience and needs. Developing a research culture at Sunfield has involved creating bridges between the practical experience of supporting young people and their families at Sunfield and the outcomes of research. This culture is still in its early stages but its development has been integral to the increasing professional competency of all staff. Staff competency is celebrated and built upon and those learning have the opportunity to pass on their knowledge – either within their staff teams or more widely, some becoming accredited trainers within the organisation or speaking at conferences, external training courses and other forums. Staff are committed to the 'active support' (Mansell, 2000) of the young people at Sunfield. As they experience the difference that alternative approaches can make to young people's lives, their openness to thinking about and trialling new approaches increases.

The steps we have taken towards generating a research culture at Sunfield are summarised below:

1. *Raising staff competency and professional awareness* – Staff training was prioritised to ensure that staff had knowledge and understanding relating to their practice and were able to reflect critically upon it. There was an expectation that staff would implement their training in their work with young people.
2. *Increasing staff experience of valuable research outcomes and creating a dynamic in which ideas can be developed* – Staff were encouraged to trial new ways of meeting young people's needs: in addition to standard professional training courses, within-class workshops were arranged between staff and visiting professionals so that they could hear first hand of the innovations introduced and the beneficial impact this had had for the young people involved. This inspired

some staff to introduce new approaches into education and residential care settings.
3. *Organisational recognition and celebration of the value of innovative practice* – Where staff introduced effective approaches, their innovations were valued by management and made a focus of internal and external interest.
4. *Accreditation* – Staff were encouraged to increase their professional competency through professional courses and nationally-recognised qualifications (for example, NVQs and higher education courses). In addition to extending their professional skills, they developed information-finding and reflection skills which are the foundation of research.
5. *Familiarity with research* – Both through their own professional development and through contact with on-going projects, staff awareness, knowledge and appreciation of research and its value have increased.
   (i) The gradual introduction of research projects over a number of years provided feedback on areas which concerned staff (for example, meeting the needs of parents (Carpenter et al., 2005; Carpenter et al., 2007; Conway, Powell & Whitehurst, 2005) and students' experiences at transition (Egerton, 2005; Smart, 2004)).
   (ii) Externally funded projects involved individual students from different settings. This increased the number of people who came into contact with research who could feed back about the impact that interventions had for the young people.
   (iii) Staff involved in research and development were encouraged to share the process and outcomes across site through periodic Innovations Forums which were open to all staff.
6. *Research support provided* – Specific responsibility for research was included within relevant posts. Initially this related to supporting externally funded research projects and carrying out internal research. However, eventually the need for a full-time research support post led to the appointment of a research officer who was able to support the development of the school's internal procedures and work with staff in developing their own research projects in terms of surveying literature and advising on research methods, analysis, rigour, reliability and ethical practice.
7. *Staff involvement in research* – The contributions of staff who would not usually have been involved in research were invited and valued within larger research projects, involving them in specific stages of the research (for instance, record-keeping, feedback, interviewing and analysis) for which they received training and in their areas of expertise (for example, nutrition). Through these experiences, and membership of research project management groups, staff became familiar with the demands of research.
8. *Future developments* – While staff carrying out larger scale, externally-funded research projects have often had access to an advisory or research management group, staff involved in smaller projects, while being able to consult the research officer, have not had the

benefit of peer support. Recently, the research officer introduced a research working group, which provides the opportunity for discussion and learning.

With many staff from different levels and disciplines engaged in research, both they and their colleagues have come to value enquiry into practice and to recognise the importance of implementing evidence-based change for the young people with whom they work. Below, Maureen Porter (2007), assistant headteacher (14–19 education) at Sunfield, describes her experience of becoming a practitioner researcher:

'The first principle of teaching must surely be that we, as teachers, have a responsibility to provide the best quality of education that is possible for each individual student. All our attitudes to the students we teach and the educational methods we employ are cultivated over the years by the acquisition of our own principles and values. Not every teacher is aware that they hold personal educational philosophies, but most would be able to describe their approaches to practice in detail. What we believe to be simply practical approaches to getting through our daily routines in the classroom or care environment can, upon investigation, often be traced to theories which have precedent, proof and justification.

However well we can justify our approaches, we need to be reflective practitioners – striving for professional self-development through critical consideration of our practices. Only by constant evaluation of our practice, embracing innovative approaches and through continuing professional development that broadens our knowledge, can we hope to impact upon future practice. As Blandford (2000) tells us: ". . . the art of self-evaluation is acquired against a background of continual learning." My attitudes to my students and the educational methods I employ to teach them have been assembled, expanded and reconsidered over the years as my understanding of students with intellectual disabilities has improved, but I reached a point in my career when I began to question my method of teaching. Why was I using a particular approach, what information was I presenting to my students, and how was I managing their challenging behaviour? However long we have been teaching: "There is a time when people's experience runs out . . ." (Horton & Freire, 1990). Research enables us to move forward from a personally held view towards a proven approach which can be shared with others. Many of us may identify with Rousseau, who wrote:

"What can I do? I have not written about other people's ideas of education but about my own. My thoughts are not those of others."

(Rousseau, 1969, p. vi)

However, as researchers, we must be ready to move on, to look objectively at why and how, and to evaluate, improve and justify. Upon my promotion to head of Sunfield's further education department, I felt empowered to ask if the teaching methods we were using in the department were the best possible. Did our 14–19 curriculum really "serve the pupil in promoting personal development and preparing the pupil for adult life?" (HMI, 1991). These questions led to the start of my research.

The staff in any school are its major resource, and as such should be willing to examine and research their own practices, critically reflecting and discussing in as many forums as possible. In order to develop we must hold up our values and beliefs to scrutiny, and this takes strength of mind, particularly in some climates of low professional morale and confidence. Ultimately, the objective is to enrich our profession and make us more efficient practitioners.

Although the enquiry cycle of research can seem never ending, remember to celebrate your achievements. As David Miliband (2005), School Standards Minister in the UK, said in another context:

"There is good reason to be proud of genuine progress . . . But although we should be proud, we should not be satisfied. Our pride in progress should whet our appetite and renew our commitment to do more."

(online)'

How can staff engage?

There is a potentially rich source of evidence already in the practitioner research domain from the wide range of staff who work with young people, for example, daily logs and evidence collected against personalised learning targets (care and education staff) or behaviour and functional analysis reports (psychology and occupational therapy staff). If this material is to be used for research purposes, however, it is important that the data recorded are of a high enough quality to support the research.

The purpose and motivation for staff to engage in research lie in two questions posed by Porter and Lacey (2004):

- What influence will my research have?

- What contribution will it make to the lives of people with learning difficulties?

The issue of concern, once identified, has to be worked into a clear, researchable question. Topics can be stimulated by many different influences, such as a new development or initiative, a recurring difficulty, a long-standing personal interest or another piece of research. Moving from a research topic to a research question is an important step and is the point at which many staff fail to proceed with their investigations (Rickman, 2005). Consultation with the research officer often enables staff to make that transition.

Staff research projects

Sunfield staff have, to date, taken part in a wide range of research projects that inform the care of our young people with severe and complex learning disabilities. These projects have focused on a range of social, communication, learning, health and environmental needs for students, families, staff and the Sunfield organisation as a whole. The research has employed a range of research methodologies (see Figure 2). Other research studies are ongoing.

Figure 2: Examples of methodologies and outcomes for participant groups in a range of completed research projects

Project	Research methodology	Outcomes for participants (limited to two examples)
'Sherborne @ Sunfield': an adapted approach to support the social engagement of young people with ASD through Sherborne Developmental Movement (Konaka, 2006).	*Multi-site action research/evaluation* Data: observation, video, interviews.	**For students during sessions:** • increase in engagement; • increase in social skills and communication of choice.
Zippy's Friends: developing curriculum resources to support students' mental health needs (Rowley & Cook, 2007) – an adaptation of the resources developed by Partnership for Children.	*Action research/evaluation* Data: observation, assessment.	**For students both in set sessions and practically:** • overall increase in understanding of emotions (most students); • improvements in relationships between peers (some students).
Engaging the thinking, feeling and will of young people with autism through the medium of colour (Pauli, 2004, 2006, 2007).	*Action research/ case study* Data: observation, video.	**For example, for 'Tim' during and outside sessions:** • improvements in concentration; • increased level of positive interaction with staff.
Investigation of the impact of interactive play on challenging behaviour (Thornton & Taylor, 2005, 2007).	*Action research/ case study* Data: observation, video.	**For example, for 'Stuart' during and outside sessions:** • development of alternative ways of coping with emotion other than self-harm; • increased desire to interact socially with staff for tangible gains, leading to increase in initiation of interaction, close proximity and imitative behaviour.
Changing perspectives on inclusion and disability for mainstream and Sunfield students involved in a community drama project (Whitehurst, 2006, 2007, in press).	*Evaluation* Data: semi-structured interview.	**For mainstream and special school students:** • mainstream and Sunfield students worked together and increased their understanding of one another; • mainstream and Sunfield students communicated their thoughts about the project, which will feed into subsequent community projects.
Evaluation of a purpose-designed, autism-specific living environment (Whitehurst, 2006).	*Evaluation* Data: focus groups, interviews and photography.	**For students/staff:** • identification of positive features of an autism-specific accommodation design, the impact on students and staff, and ideas for improvement to be fed into future projects; • opportunity for student opinions to be communicated.
Development of the 14–19 curriculum (Porter, 2007).	*Evaluation* Data: questionnaires, interviews, observation.	**For students/organisation:** • development of an integrated 14–19 curriculum which reflected the needs of the students at Sunfield and met the requirements and recommendations of statutory and non-statutory guidance.
Families' experience of induction to Sunfield (Carpenter, Conway & Whitehurst, 2005; Carpenter, Conway, Whitehurst & Attfield, 2007; Conway, Powell & Whitehurst, 2005).	*Evaluation* Data: semi-structured interviews.	**For families:** • families' comments and observations informed future planning for families' induction to Sunfield leading to improvements to service delivery and greater understanding of induction from a family perspective.
Development and evaluation of a mental health training package for staff (Carpenter, Coughlan, Logan & Whitehurst, 2007).	*Evaluation* Data: questionnaire.	**For staff:** • mental health training needs identified; • increased confidence in identifying and responding to young people's mental health issues.
Transference of training into practice: developing a model of training evaluation (Chatwin & Rattley, 2007).	*Action research* Data: observation.	**For trainers and organisation:** • clearer understanding of implementation of training across site; • ability to provide individualised and targeted response to practice issues leading to improved implementation across site.

Enabling school research

External project funding

Some projects receive external funding through grant applications. For example, the Sherborne Developmental Movement Project was externally sponsored by the Three Guineas Trust, thus enabling a recontextualisation of this long-established programme (Sherborne, 2001) specifically for young people with profound autistic spectrum disorder. In partnership with Sunfield's Research Associate from the Sherborne Movement Foundation, who brought insight and rigour to this project (Hill, 2006), this research moved from internal trials to multi-site trials involving ten other schools and has resulted in the recently launched 'Sherborne @ Sunfield' Movement Programme. It has revealed much about engagement as a key feature of the learning pattern of the young person with ASD (Konaka, 2006).

Other projects are co-commissioned and co-sponsored by and with organisations sharing similar dilemmas. Transition from school to adult provision is a major factor in the lives of young people with ASD and their families. Sunfield's initial baseline research (Smart, 2004) revealed a high level of placement breakdown. In conjunction with Home Farm Trust and the West Midlands Special Educational Needs Regional Partnership, the Transition Solutions Project has been established. This is a three-year project focusing on supporting families of young people with complex learning needs moving from a residential school to adult services. Emotional and mental health needs also provide an important focus for research. Sunfield and Partnership with Children are collaborating on the adaptation and trialling of Partnership with Children's personal social and health education programme, 'Zippy's Friends' (Rowley & Cook, 2007), which is for young people with severe and complex learning disabilities. The programme aims to promote coping skills in social situations which will enhance young people's well-being and improve their life chances.

The need for knowledge acquisition, practice-sharing and debate as a means for solution formulation should not be underrated in the research process. Alongside this project, the West Midlands Special Educational Needs Regional Partnership has sponsored – through Sunfield's Professional Development Centre – three seminars for practitioners in the region to come together to share curriculum concerns around transition for young people with autistic spectrum disorder and to gather information about materials and practice models currently available. These debates and their outcomes will be fed into the Transition Solutions Project which runs until September 2007.

Collaboration with higher education

Collaboration with higher education institutions is another way of stimulating and supporting research within a school culture. However, unlike the traditional pattern of locating the research at a university, the model adapted at Sunfield allows for the researchers' main base to be the school. An international teacher fellowship was established for a teacher researcher from the University of Andolou in Turkey, who accepted half-time, class-based teaching alongside an experienced Sunfield teacher. This pair collaborated on a project which focused on the comparison of two main pedagogical approaches in the field of autistic spectrum disorders. The teacher fellow led on the research style and approaches, but gained much from the dialogue with the colleague from another culture. What evolved here was ipsative research as it examined child-centred learning in a very specific skill area. A joint PhD studentship, shared between Sunfield and the University of Worcester and located at Sunfield, is focused on the development of ASD-specific learning environments which can be built into some new classrooms.

Inter-school collaboration

Close collaboration with other schools has been a key feature of Sunfield's work and this resulted in a particular arts-based inclusion project. 'The Monkey King' musical drama project took place over a two-year period. The project involved Sunfield young people and staff and the young people from a mainstream middle school, working with professionals from the Open Theatre Company and the Shysters Theatre Company in Coventry (both for actors with learning disabilities) and young musicians from the Birmingham Conservatoire (Whitehurst, in press; Whitehurst & Howells, 2006). The project culminated in a major theatre production presented at the Birmingham Hippodrome over five performances.

The research strand of this project looked specifically at how the perceptions of mainstream pupils changed as a result of working closely alongside peers with autism and severe and complex learning disabilities (Whitehurst & Howells, 2006). A process of positive social construction was formed from this research, building on current theories relating to inclusion (Carpenter & Shevlin, 2004; Mittler, in press). The project has been disseminated through performance, presentation to staff at an Innovations Forum, through seminars at universities and through a presentation at the National Teacher Research Panel Conference (www.livegroup.co.uk/ntrp).

Conclusion

As practitioners, working with our young people day by day, it is impossible not to appreciate Rose's (2002) comment that:

> 'Researching with, rather than on, people with disabilities is an important distinction and must guide the motivations and actions of all who engage in the process.'
>
> (p. 47)

The following four tenets of practice form the foundations of our commitment to continuing research alongside our young people and their families. We value practice that is:

- evidence-based – through robust recording of young people's developmental progress and attainment, reflecting on our practice;

- research-focused – through asking ethical questions that improve our knowledge and understanding of the young people and the quality of the service we provide them with;
- family-orientated – through resources and support that enable families to demonstrate their love and commitment;
- child-centred – through individually tailored, high-quality education, care, psychology and therapeutic services.

Sunfield, established in 1930, has a long and proud tradition based on the premise that our support for young people with learning disabilities must meet them at their point of greatest need. Sunfield offered education to young people with learning disabilities long before the 1971 watershed. During 1959–1960, Nordoff and Robbins developed their music therapy programme there (Nordoff & Robbins, 1992). As Wilson (2002) states:

'If educational research is to change practice for the better, it can . . . only do this by operating through the minds and the understanding of practitioners.'

(p. 143)

We need to respond to the new challenges presented by our young people. They will provide the key to developing effective specialist schools. We must accept the challenge for the sake of our young people, change and go forward.

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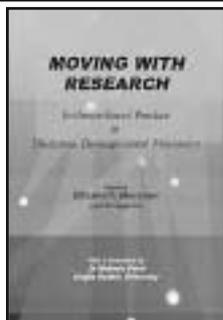Zuber-Skerritt, O. (ed.) (1989) *New Directions in Action Research.* London: Falmer Press.

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