



**Creativity Action Research Awards,
2005. A Critical Evaluation
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and Pete McGuigan (CAPE UK)**

In 2004, Creative Partnerships introduced CARA

- To challenge existing practice of creative partnerships between educators and practitioners and encourage a shift toward a more reflective and evidence based stance.

[1] Creative Partnerships is an organisation, based at Arts Council England, operating in 36 regions, funded by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport.

- CARA was managed by CAPE UK and all projects took place between spring - summer 2005.

Participants

- A range of institutions from pre-school nurseries to secondary schools
- Over 80% of projects involved learning through the arts.
- A full range of curriculum subjects were involved and many projects introduced areas outside of the traditional curriculum.
- Many partnerships targeted children and young people with 'special educational needs' or who were considered to be underachieving in relation to their peers.



Visual Art and Creative Writing with
Year 2 / 3 Children

Mentor and Critical Friend

- Each funded project was allocated an experienced mentor to keep the action research element in focus and act as a critical friend



Visual Art and Creative Writing with
Year 2 / 3 Children

Why Action Research ?

- some have argued that the merits of AR are difficult to define and that,
- ‘...few systematic insights and findings seem to have been generated as yet for our understanding of teaching by means of action research[1]



[1] (Biddle & Anderson 1986, p. 239) cited in Walker, R. ‘Time for the demise of classroom research?’

Problem finding and stepping out from comfort zones?

- CARA required that collaborators and partnerships identified problems to explore and questions to answer. The action research element was designed to ward against too many 'findings' and encourage as many 'learnings' as possible to emerge.

AR is 'research within reach'.

- AR can be levelling in its implication and has offered to teachers in particular an opportunity to validate their hunches and illuminate their practices
- Most teachers involved in CARA had no previous experience of conducting research at all.



How can the outdoor classroom impact on children's learning particularly able low achievers?

Others have argued . . .

- The essential creativity of teaching, if recognised is one of the means by which ‘the connective tissue’ between teaching and research can be realised.[1]

[1] ibid p. 166.

Research can be

- ‘an idealised version of professional practice itself ... characterised not by separate and different methods of inquiry; but by a more sustained attention to the methods of practice.’ [1]
- enabling participant voices, to bring their authentic experiences to figure in research, to challenge and question and speak out. [1]
[1] Winter, R. ‘Finding a Voice. Thinking with others’. In Educational Action Research, vol 6, no1 1998. p.54
- [1] Winter, R. see other reference p. 59.

AR as valuable tool for change

- AR has the potential to connect with concerns to change the climate of school and bring about deep rooted reform within a progressive agenda.
- Rob Walker argues, the kind of research that is needed to understand and illuminate change in educational practice should be ‘transdisciplinary and action oriented’. It should provide not just feed back but ‘feed forward’,
- ‘closely geared to developing responses to changes as they happen (and) . . . intellectually agile (with) . . . a high degree of reflexivity, for many of the assumptions that inform it will be subject to change as the research proceeds.’[\[1\]](#)

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[\[1\]](#) Walker, op. cit.

Hope and happening: contradictions and tensions

- Action research was interpreted by project partners in a wide variety of ways
- There was a strong element of disagreement between practitioners and mentors on the degree to which the projects constituted action research and the degree to which the project activities impacted on children and young people's learning.

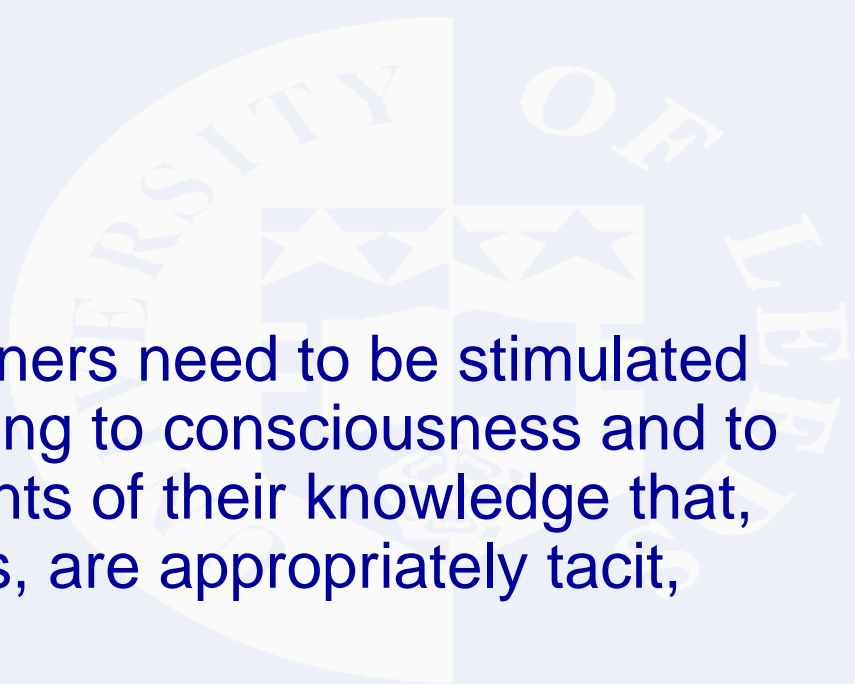
Orientation to wider field of enquiry

- it is likely that projects such as CARA will be *inherently and essentially contextual, partial, local and hypothetical* [\[1\]](#).

[\[1\]](#) (Fay, 1987:213)
cited in Piggott, 2002



How does the experience of working with child-sized puppets and drama enhance/develop emotional intelligence in the Early Years?

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- ‘Teachers and other practitioners need to be stimulated and supported in order ‘to bring to consciousness and to articulate the relevant elements of their knowledge that, for normal teaching purposes, are appropriately tacit, schematic and intuitive.’ [1]

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[1] D. McIntyre

- Bridging the gap between research and
- practice
- Cambridge Journal of Education
- Vol. 35, No. 3, November 2005, pp. 357–382. p.372

- ‘The element of action research in the project, at times, felt burdensome. The need to collect evidence whilst being involved in activities was often difficult. It was also found that where some children were conscious of being recorded, their responses changed and became unreliable, whereas other children valued having their views collected. Honing the research question was challenging but was a valuable process and served to guide and focus our endeavour. A greater level of support would have been appreciated throughout the project as none of the partners had engaged in action research previously.’



How concerned and involved can children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties be about their contexts when they are part creating a learning, doing and sharing environmental project?

Questions

- Why did the apparently simple process of reflecting on interventions in a systematic and evidenced way prove so challenging to many while for others seemed to flow naturally from their initial ideas?
- What kind of support is required for projects to realise more than a minimal interpretation of the possibilities of action research?
- What impact has CARA had on the schools involved and in particular, has the particular interpretation of action research adopted impacted differently on the schools involved?
- Finally, what patterns have emerged from CARA that are useful 'learnings' that can feed forward to similar programmes in the future?

factors that helped the action research aspect of projects to be successful:

- building in adequate amounts of time for partnership reflection as a primary prerequisite of the investigation;
- being able to use familiar methods and existing expertise to good effect, such as methodically structured observations and thoughtful diary work;
- having adequate 'expert' input for the action research, usually in the form of a mentor who was a part of the project from its beginning.
- a mentor who was able to part of the project from the planning stage, someone able to make a useful number of face-to-face visits to school throughout the life of the project. Nearly everyone in the evaluation sample thought that this was important.
- more practical tutorage of action research methodologies earlier on: a third of interviewees though that the level provided was not adequate;
- a high enough level of resourcing to pay for an additional member of staff to carry out some of the observations. Many teachers and creative practitioners realised they were too involved in the creative process with pupils to be able to step back from it.

Key Factor 1. Appropriate Mentoring

- Mentoring is a dynamic process highly contextual and might be interpreted differently according to a variety of factors. Those factors revolve around issues of power, status and authority and become entangled with cultural complexities of the ways that educational professionals relate to each other across boundaries and sectors. These boundaries are historical and are difficult to overcome.
- *‘Sometimes the whole programme had an academic flavour that was a bit intimidating as I hadn’t done a research project before’* [1]
- [1] rept p. 18]

Key Factor 2. Recognising The 'Wow!' moment

- 'Our mentor's timely visit and intervention turned our focus on its head and gave us renewed impetus and challenge. She asked a very pertinent question: 'what do *you* do that makes the difference?' A seemingly mundane question but it hit at the heart of our thinking and made us realise that a lot of our evidence came from the interactions between adults and children. For us, it was like a revelation and a very exciting moment, one of those 'wow' life changing experiences: very powerful'

AR changing initial questions

- An initial question such as ‘how do children learn creatively in the outdoors?’ became an exploration of the significance of patterns of ‘silence’ in the relationships between adults and children in supporting creativity.



Key factor 3. Risk taking

- Risk taking was evident in the CARA projects, especially where teachers felt enabled to step out of their comfort zones for a limited period of time. One project reported on how this was felt by the teacher partner.
- 'At first, the lead teacher found it very hard to 'let go' and give way to a less structured approach, which gave responsibility to the children for their own learning and development. When she realised the benefits of giving freedom and ownership to the children, she found that it encouraged and allowed greater creativity and independent learning. The teacher also found that children can flourish when working with someone who has no preconceived notions of them.' [1]

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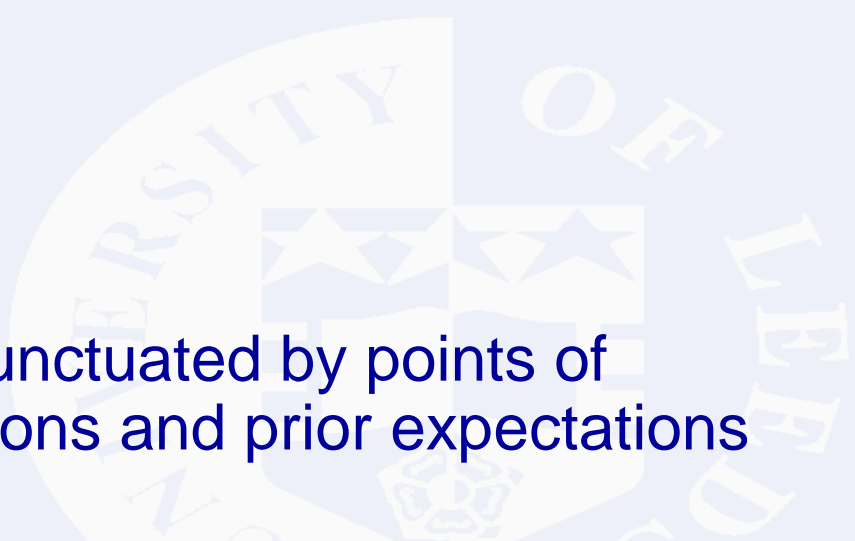
[1] (SE04)

Key Factor 4. Border Crossing

- The blurring of boundaries between different subject areas, disciplines and professionals is a necessary part of the process of reflecting on change and transformation. Jon Elliott has sought to re-imagine the legitimacy and value of educational action research 'as democratic schooling'[\[1\]](#) Such blurring of boundaries are part of this re-imagining and do include the challenge to generational divisions in schools.



[\[1\]](#) Elliott, 2005, p. 364

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- The ‘learning journey’ was punctuated by points of reflection where presuppositions and prior expectations were challenged and met.
 - ‘We found our imagination could not match theirs and that to intervene with questions at the wrong moment might break its flow. . . .As the project progressed the boundaries between us blurred, sometimes Nicola became the artist, Martha the teacher. Our partnership was bonded by a strong respect for the children and their ideas; lines between us and the children also soon blurred with the children taking the adult’s roles and adults becoming their students. [\[1\]](#)
 - [\[1\]](#) quotes taken from final report , LON15.

Key Factor 5. The Material Environment

- ‘From pupils’ comments we have also become more aware of some pupils lack of confidence in lessons where a formal seating arrangement has been used and we are looking at other methods to make the history classrooms a comfortable environment where pupils feel confident to discuss their ideas.’ [1]



[1] NW02

Key Factor 6. Data control

- for many, the emphasis on research led to the amassing of too much data to handle effectively in the time. With an emphasis on visual methods that many took up, the analysis became even more problematic.

Key Factor 7. Time Management

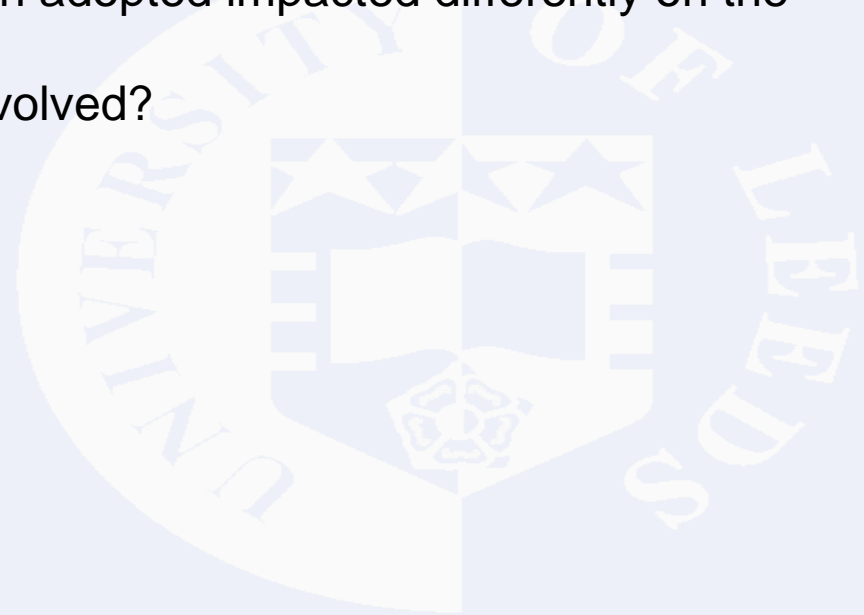
- ‘Everyone found that time was an obstacle, and it may well have been more effective to have given less time to delivery and more time to the reflection process. For example, the use of filmed footage was a vital tool for reviewing the project for all involved, the children included. However, time constraints meant that the original intention to review and reflect upon footage of each workshop was not always possible.’ [1]
- [1] (LON13)

Key Factor 8. From Findings to Learnings

- Research that is oriented away from the production of 'findings' and
- towards the realisation of 'learnings' implies a kind of 'permanent education'^[1],
^[1] the term is taken from Raymond Williams.
- This implies a focus and systematic emphasis on 'problem finding' rather than 'problem fixing' which challenges popular conceptions of what research is about.
- There is evidence in the final project reports, that some partnerships had understood the principles of action research enough to allow for the flow of 'learnings' to influence each stage in the process, after systematic review

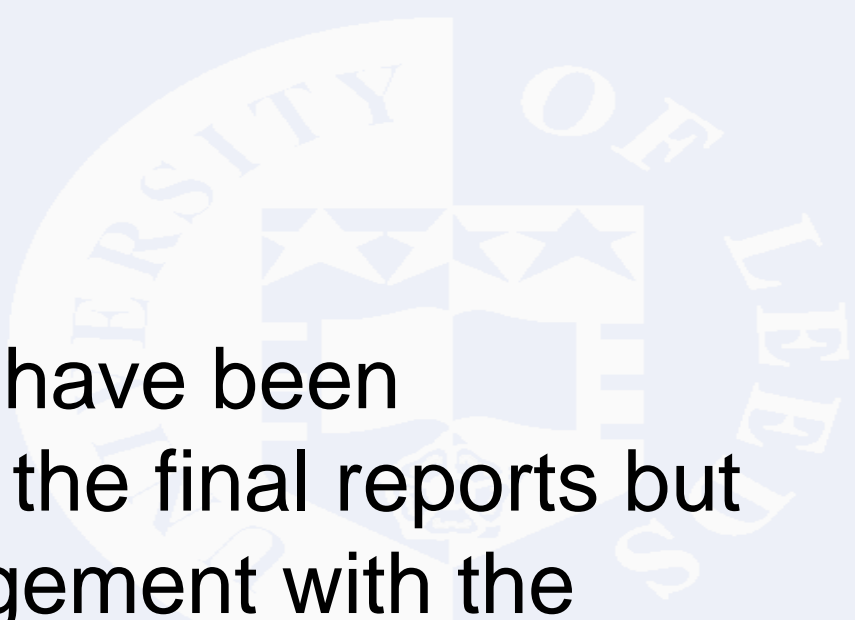
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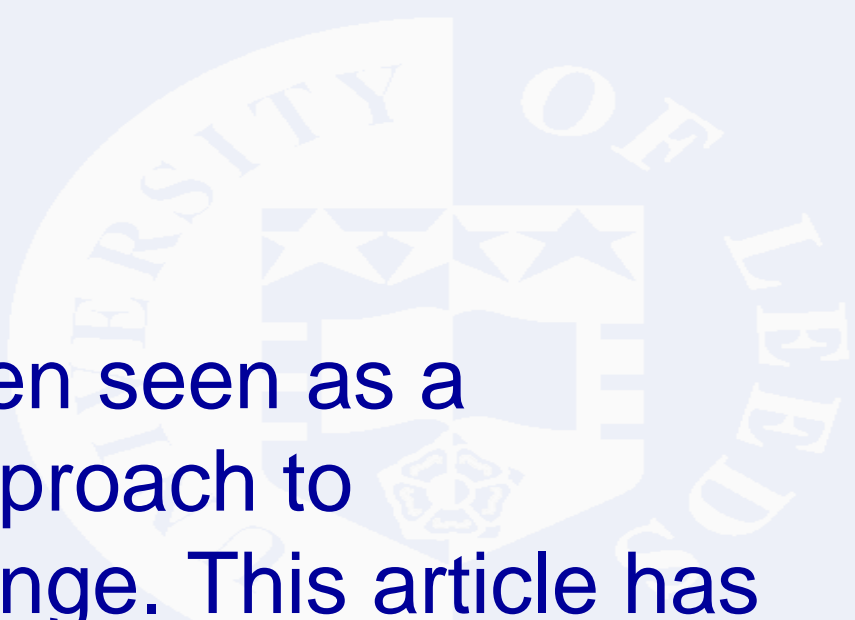
- Ongoing research




CARA - examples of good practice

- where links and connections between initial intended action and research and other factors have been recognised;
- where participants have become alert to more possibilities than they had first imagined;
- where multiple perspectives are embraced and celebrated;
- where there is the recording of 'learnings' more than findings;
- where the vision of the 'democratic school' emerges through the experience.

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- The background of the slide features a large, faint watermark of the University of Leeds crest. The crest is circular and contains a shield with a cross, four stars, and a book. The text "UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS" is written around the perimeter of the crest.
- Multiple perspectives have been evidenced in many of the final reports but any meaningful engagement with the implications of such differences is rare.

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- The background of the slide features a large, faint watermark of the University of Leeds crest. The crest is circular and contains a shield with various symbols, including stars and a book. The text "UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS" is written around the perimeter of the crest.
- Action research is often seen as a deceptively simple approach to development and change. This article has attempted to explore the complexities that underlie the gap between rhetoric and reality and between hope and happening.

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- ‘It will be wrought out of a political struggle, by teachers and
 - others within society, to create the material conditions for a free, open and democratically constructed practical discourse to emerge as a context for professional action.’[\[1\]](#)

- [\[1\]](#) Elliott, J. ‘Becoming critical: the failure to connect’ *Educational Action Research*, vol 13, no 3, 2005. p. 363