

COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS

**A Powerful Impetus for the Transfer
of Knowledge into Action**

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“I’ve been fostering for 15 years.

I’ve even won an award.

Big Deal!

All I see is things going downhill and getting worse.

What good will come from this research?

Will anything change?”

[Foster Carer 2003]

**“I’ve participated in heaps of surveys
but seen no improvements.**

**What difference will this survey
make?”**

[Foster Carer 2003]

“It’s really disheartening to think that you do all this work and nothing may come of it.”

[PhD Researcher 2003]

“It’s not unusual for Social Researchers and research participants to feel frustrated and at times cynical about the potential for research to have a positive impact on policies that could improve the circumstances of the people studied.”

[Croker, F.A. Review of Munford and Sanders (2003) Making a Difference in Families: research that creates change]

Concern:

- Limited transfer of knowledge from research into policy and practice

Hence:

- Limited changes, improvements, developments in practice
- Limited benefits for families and children

Barriers to the transfer of knowledge into policy and practice

- **Competing influences in the policy making process:**

ideology

politics

economics

research

Resistance to the implementation of research informed (evidence based) practice

access to readily understandable knowledge

time for critical reflection

Blame Culture (Barratt, 2003)

power relations (Michaux, 2003; Worrall & McKenzie, 2003)

concerns about validity and transferability of research evidence (Fook, 1996; Berridge, 2002; Thorpe, 2003)

conflicts between research findings, service user perspectives and culturally appropriate processes (Rawen, et al, 2003; Rawsthorne, 2003)

Collaborative research partnerships can provide a powerful impetus for overcoming resistance and for affecting change in practice with families and children

For example:

The JCU/QDOF Mackay Whitsunday Foster Care Research Partnership

➤ **What is it?**

➤ **In what ways is it successful?**

➤ **How is it influencing practice?**

➤ **What ingredients have underpinned success?**

August 2002

**Research Partnership established between
School of Social Work and Community
Welfare, JCU**

and

**Mackay/Whitsunday Region of Queensland
Department of Families**

to undertake

**A wide ranging study of the Foster Care
System and Foster Carers**

2002 - 2004

**Research funded by ARC LINKAGE Grant
plus
substantial cash and in-kind contributions
from QDOF**

Rationale

Identified urgent need in study Region for research to provide an evidence base for improvements in foster care, given:

- **Growing concerns about the quality of foster care services, in light of**
- **Increased demand AND increasingly complex expectations of foster care**

FOUR KEY AREAS OF RESEARCH

- 1. Cost benefit analysis of the Foster Care system**
- 2. What makes a good foster carer?**
- 3. Foster care for Indigenous and Australian South Sea Islander children**
- 4. Foster care for children with disabilities**

In what ways is the Research Partnership successful? (even ahead of major findings)

- 1. Obtaining funding over five years**
- 2. Gaining recognition for research excellence**
- 3. Building research capacity in the QDOF region**
- 4. Affecting improvements in practice in the region**
- 5. Influencing social policy and practice beyond the Region**

Thorpe, et al (2004)

How is it influencing practice and making a difference for children and families?

(a) In the Region

- Changes in awareness amongst practitioners and managers
- Changes in organisational culture and practices
- Changes in service delivery

(b) Beyond the Region

- Influence on policy

Changes in Awareness

- Critical incident in study Region in May 2002 prompted:
 - Identification of need to improve foster care services
 - Initiation of research to provide an evidence base for the direction and nature of improvements

Changes in Awareness (cont.)

- “research mindedness” prompted:
 - Development of research partnership with JCU
 - Formation of a Research Interest Group amongst front line staff
 - Development of research skills through postgraduate degree enrolments by 5 staff
 - Establishment in the Region of CROCCS: Centre for Research on Community and Children’s Services
 - Exposure to ideas about research as a transformative experience for participants
 - respect for voice and narratives
 - empowering and culturally appropriate research processes

Munford and Sanders(2003)

Changes in Organisational Culture and Practices in the Region

- Engagement with “learning organisation” principles and processes and Learning Action Practice Trials
- Allocating work time to read, reflect, study; and for skills development and continuing professional education
- Shift from Blame Culture (fear of getting it wrong) TO openness to new/alternative perspectives
- Valuing service user perspectives and increased accountability to service users (especially children and young people)
- Increased awareness of organisational power; contradictions between rhetoric and practice (eg “Partnership” with foster carers)

Changes in Service Delivery

- Stimulus for program development
 - Training in Case Planning
 - Certificate II for Indigenous Carers
 - Continuing Education and Training workshops for foster carers
 - Respite care program
 - Relative carers' support and Information group
 - A strengths-based group for Parents with children in care

Changes in Service Delivery (cont.)

- Stimulus for practice to break down power barriers:

Let's Talk days with foster carers

Yarning up days with Indigenous communities

*SPLAT** for children and young people in care

*Super Participation Learning Action Team (Daly, et al 2003)

Changes in Everyday Practice

- To reflect principles of participation, inclusion, and partnership
- To seek out and use research knowledge in:
 - report writing
 - case planning
 - exploring “best practice” approaches
- To engage in critical reflective practice, using the Research Interest Group for peer supervision

Influence on policy – and potentially on practice beyond the region

- Research informed submissions made to Qld CMC Inquiry into abuse in foster care (2003)
- Recommendations included in CMC Report and in subsequent Blueprint for Implementation (2004)
- Involvement in advocacy by AFCA re: National Foster Care Plan (2004)

What ingredients have underpinned success?

- **Active commitment to research in Industry Partner organisation**
- **Research minded leadership by Regional Director**
- **Research Interest Group for all staff**
- **Postgraduate research projects by staff**
- **Team leaders enrolled in further study**
- **Strong relationships between University & Department staff**
- **University researchers' visible and active involvement in the Region**
- **University commitment to research leadership**
- **Support of Research participants: foster carers, children and young people in care, Indigenous elders and carers**