

## Dr Jacky Tyrie: Running a Network – what, how and why?

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I am an academic at Swansea University where I teach and research young children's rights. My research interests focus on all rights of children under 8 years old, with a particular interest in younger children's right to be 'heard', under article 12 of the UNCRC.

Colleagues from Wales and I have been funded by the ESRC's Education Research Programme to undertake research with teachers and children to explore the [embedding of children's participative rights into schools for 5 to 7 year olds](#). As part of this research, we wanted to [develop a collaborative network of experts and professionals](#) which would be a space for the information and learning gained through the data collection to be discussed and reviewed.

### The plan!

The plan was to create a network of interested individuals (academics, researchers, student teachers, teachers, IT providers, representatives from NGOs and policy makers). We hoped these professionals would interact with the research through the project website and regular online seminars. During the life course of the project, the aim was that tools will be put in place to maintain the network as a mechanism for transformative practice to support participation for young children after the project is completed. The goal was to be able to enable impact from the research to be embedded during the life course of the project and beyond. This was translated into 3 key aims:

- Knowledge exchange – between members of the network and with the research project.
- Engagement of members in impact on practice / research (mechanism for transformative practice).
- To be sustainable after the end of the research.

This blog will examine the reality of creating, running and maintaining a Network to enact these goals in practice. It will then critically reflect on the problems and reasons behind the problems.

### Reality: defining the purpose our network

One of the first challenges we faced was the scope and scale of the network we were interested in creating. The focus of the research project is around children aged 5 to 7 and their participative rights. The network aimed to support the transformative practices of practitioners to improve children's experiences of participative rights. To do this we asked ourselves the following questions...

- Who should be members of this network, to meet its remit?
- Was this to be a community of teaching practice, or should we include research and academic colleagues?
- Should we aim big or keep select?

In the end, after consultation with our adult advisory group (an expert group of professionals from the fields of research, education and policy) we decided, to meet the goals of transformation and impact, we would include all individuals who had an interest in children's participative rights, but target specifically practitioners or teachers who worked with young children. This has meant that we have a large network of over 130 people who cover a wide range of sectors, such as, teachers from primary and non-maintained settings, higher education professionals, academics and researchers, local council staff, charities, policy makers and government officials.

### **Problems: High numbers on paper but limited engagement**

As noted previously, the network has grown to have over one hundred members. However, we see much smaller numbers of members activity engaging with our events and communication with fewer than 40 members engaging. The activities we undertake include:

1. e-mails with a monthly newsletter,
2. quarterly online seminar series, and
3. occasional email surveys to canvas network members perspectives.

While the certain amount of disengagement or lack of attendance is always the case for events, the fact that we have so many members yet only see a small proportion engaging with us in either services or events ask the question of *why* people choose to become members if they're not able to or are not interested in actively engaging.

### **Problems: information dissemination but not interaction and iterative network**

In keeping with this experience, we also see that members tend to want to have information provided to them rather than engage in written, verbal, or face-to-face activities with the research project. We have had lots of positive feedback about the network newsletter which we provide on a monthly basis. The newsletter provides updates on the project research, and other relevant research and news and events. We have also had positive feedback from the seminar events, with those who attend seminars being engaged and taking part in discussions and conversations with each other. However, many of our members do not attend these seminar events and seemed to have no interest in engaging further.

One activity which we tried, but did not maintain, was a chat forum, integrated into our web page. This chat forum offered a chance for members to share events and information, but also to have conversations and engage in dialogue with each other and the project. Not a single member engaged with this chat forum, we are not exactly sure why there was a lack of engagement. We can hypothesise this was because they did not see it worthwhile, or value this type of interaction, however we can't dismiss that there was some technical or practical reason why members chose not to engage.

### **Reasons behind problems: Challenges of time and capacity**

One of the possible reasons for this low level of engagement could be down to professionals' capacity in terms of time and workload management. One thing we have seen across all the activities we have undertaken, in the past and currently, is that members struggle to prioritise engaging with the network over other workload tasks.

### **Reasons behind problems: Issue of impact timescales**

One of the goals of the network was to impact and influence teaching practice through the work of the network. The challenges of academic research having real world impact are well documented, and one of the biggest challenges of both measuring and understanding the impact of research. This is particularly the case when the intended impact is on everyday practises. But, if the main goal of this network was to be part of a mechanism for transformative change and impact on practise, it is hard to see this impact and indeed measure it while the research is still ongoing and key findings are yet to be publicised or promoted. We may not be able to know the true impact of the research for another few years, and indeed measuring this impact can be challenging.

## Where are we now? Moving forward!

As we come towards the last 6 months of the research, we feel the network has developed well but has yet to really engage critically with the research in the way we had hoped, due to the challenges, of time, capacity and motivation as outlined above. However, we hope in these last 6 months and into the future, past the funding, the impact element of the research on our members and on their practice will start to be more visible.