Praxis, Ethics and Power: Developing Praxeology as a Participatory Paradigm for Early Childhood Research

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Abstract: The discipline and practice of participatory, practice-led research has grown rapidly in recent years and it is now widely accepted as making an important and serious contribution to the knowledge base of early childhood. Despite this progress recently we have come to understand that our worldview has needed to shift again in response to the troubling paradoxes we face in attempting to live out our participatory vision in our research practice. We are conscious too of the need to respond to a continued and sometimes reasonable professional critique of the robustness of our participatory methods. It is this shift in perspective that is set out in this paper, and has led us to accept that praxis in itself is not enough, and that to realise authentically a participatory paradigm in our research requires us to develop a worldview in which reflection (phronesis) and action (praxis) done in conjunction with others, needs to be immersed within a more astute awareness about power (politics) and a sharpened focus on values (ethics) in all of our thinking and actions. We see this mix of phronesis, praxis, ethics and power at the heart of a ‘praxeological’ worldview in modern early childhood research. This paradigm is helping us to shift our research work into what we hope will be a more profound and intensely participatory, and thus more authentically democratic, phase. In this paper we aim to share our developing vision of ‘praxeological research’. We look at its key elements; trace its roots, theoretically and conceptually; and explore the particular contribution it can make in research. We exemplify how an early childhood praxeologist with a participatory worldview might ethically operate in their inquiries, and consider what methodologies they might use and what challenges they might face in attempting to make praxeology a part of their ‘life of inquiry’. Finally, we shall explore issues of power, status, visibility and progress within the research world of early childhood.

Résumé: La discipline et les pratiques de la recherche participative ont fort évolué et sont aujourd’hui largement accepté pour leur contribution aux savoirs sur la petite enfance. Malgré cette évolution, notre vision du monde est à nouveau remise en question, suite à une confrontation avec de nouveaux paradoxes en mettant cette vision participative en pratique. Il nous faut répondre aux critiques soutenues et souvent raisonnables de la rigueur des méthodes de recherche participatives. Le changement de perspective qui est décliné dans ce chapitre indique que le concept de praxis ne suffit pas pour réaliser un paradigme réellement participatif. Il nous faut développer une vision dans laquelle la réflexion (phronesis) et l’action (praxis) sont accompagnées d’une compréhension des relations de pouvoir (politisques) et une attention particulière pour les valeurs (éthique) dans notre pensée aussi bien que dans nos actions. Cet assemblage de phronesis, praxis, politiques et éthique est au cœur de la recherche ‘praxéologique’, dont nous examinons les origines théoriques et conceptuelles et sa contribution unique à la recherche. Nous explorons également comment le chercheur praxéologique et avec une vision participative pourrait opérer dans le domaine de la petite enfance et nous considérons des questions méthodologiques, ainsi que les défis qu’ils posent en mettant les principes de la recherche praxéologique en pratique. Enfin, nous explorons également les relations de pouvoir, de statut, de visibilité et de progrès dans le monde de la recherche de la petite enfance.

Resumen: Tanto el estudio como la aplicación de una investigación participativa y basada en la práctica ha crecido rápidamente en los últimos años y podemos decir que, en este momento, es ampliamente aceptada como una contribución importante y bien fundamentada para el conocimiento básico de la primera infancia. A pesar de este progreso, hemos llegado a comprender recientemente que nuestra visión del mundo ha tenido que cambiar de nuevo en respuesta a las inquietantes paradojas que debemos enfrentar al tratar de aplicar nuestra visión participativa a la práctica de la investigación. Somos conscientes, también, de la necesidad de responder a las continuas y, a veces, razonables críticas en relación a la solidez de nuestros métodos participativos. Es este cambio de perspectiva lo que se expone en este trabajo. Un cambio que nos ha llevado a aceptar que la praxis en sí misma no es suficiente y que, para alcanzar un auténtico paradigma participativo en nuestra investigación, estamos obligados a desarrollar una visión del mundo en el que la reflexión (phronesis) y la acción (praxis) realizadas en unión a otras personas, tiene que estar integrada en una conciencia más sagaz sobre el poder (política) y centrarse, aún más, en los valores (ética) de todos nuestros pensamientos y acciones. Consideramos esta combinación de phronesis, praxis, ética y poder, en el seno de una visión "praxeológica" del mundo, como elementos clave en la investigación moderna de la primera infancia. Este paradigma nos está ayudando a cambiar nuestro trabajo de investigación en lo que esperamos será una nueva etapa más profunda, participativa y, por tanto, más auténticamente democrática. En este trabajo nos proponemos compartir nuestra visión, aún en desarrollo, de la "investigación praxeológica". Nos hemos centrado en sus elementos esenciales, en sus raíces, teóricas y conceptuales, y en explorar la contribución particular que puede hacer a la investigación. Ejemplificamos cómo un praxeólogo de la primera infancia que actúa con una visión participativa del mundo podría operar éticamente en sus investigaciones. Entramos, también, a considerar qué metodologías podrían utilizarse y cuáles son los desafíos que habría de enfrentar en su intento por hacer de la praxeología una parte de su "deseo de saber". Por último, vamos a explorar las cuestiones del poder, el estatus, la visibilidad y el progreso en el mundo de la investigación sobre la primera infancia.

Keywords: Praxeology, participatory research, research paradigms, transformational leadership, praxis, research methodologies, research skills.

Introduction

The discipline and practice of participatory, practice-led research (Eisenberg, Baglia and Pyrnes, 2006; McNiff, 2002; Reason and Bradbury, 2008) has grown rapidly in recent years and it is now widely accepted as making an important and serious contribution to the knowledge base of early childhood. Over many years, our work in CREC (the Centre for Research in Early Childhood in Birmingham, UK), has embraced, exemplified and contributed to this development of practitioner researchers, action researchers and practice-based researchers, (Pascal, 1993; Pascal, 2003; Koshy and Pascal, 2011; Bertram and Pascal, 2012). We have also made visible our continuing struggle to operate authentically within a participatory worldview in the belief that early childhood research should and could be more democratic, participatory, empowering and should also be deeply ethical and political in its orientation (Pascal and Bertram, 2009). The influences on us, in our journey as early childhood researchers, have been deep and profound, ranging from the inspirational children, parents and practitioner colleagues with whom we have collaborated, to dialogues with radical foresighted policy makers and politicians and those who were not, to risk-taking and risk-averse university tutors and students, and, of course, to the many courageous theorists and scholars whose texts and ideas have both challenged and spurred us on to think differently and creatively about the complexity of the ‘real world’ (Robson, 2002) of multi-professional practice with families and young children. This shared journey of exploration and discovery still goes on and continues to enchant and beguile us.

We are well embedded in the theory and practice of practitioner and practice based research, and have worked hard to explore and develop a participatory paradigm in the research and in the development projects we have undertaken. However, recently we have come to understand that our worldview has needed to shift again in response to our own continued struggles and felt inadequacies and the troubling paradoxes we face in attempting to live out our participatory vision in our research practice. We are conscious too of the need to respond to a continued and sometimes reasonable professional critique of the robustness of our participatory methods. It is this shift in our perspective to a more praxeological worldview that we want to set out in this paper, and is exemplified in Figure 1. The shift leads us to accept that praxis in itself is not enough, and that to authentically realise a participatory paradigm in our work requires us to develop a worldview in which reflection (phronesis) and action (praxis) done in conjunction with others, needs to be immersed within a much more astute awareness about power (politics) and a sharpened focus on values (ethics) in all of our thinking and actions. We see this mix of phronesis, praxis, ethics and power at the heart of what we increasingly recognise as a ‘praxeological’ worldview in modern early childhood research. We believe this paradigm is helping us to shift our research work into what we hope will be a more profound and intensely participatory, and thus more authentically democratic, phase. In this development we should acknowledge our important collaboration with our Portuguese colleagues, João and Júlia Formosinho (2012) and their team at the research centre of the Childhood Association in Braga (Oliveira-Formosinho and Araújo, 2004, 2006; Oliveira-Formosinho, 2009).
In this paper we hope to share our developing vision of ‘praxeological research’ and ask you to accept that it is not yet fully realised and invite you to contribute to the dialogue. We look at its key elements; trace its roots, theoretically and conceptually; and explore the particular contribution it can make in research. We want to add to our growing knowledge base of early childhood, exemplify how an early childhood praxeologist with a participatory worldview might ethically operate in their inquiries, and consider what methodologies they might use and what challenges they might face in attempting to make praxeology a part of their ‘life of inquiry’. As Socrates said, ‘an unexamined life is not worth living’. Finally, we shall explore issues of power, status, visibility and progress within the research world of early childhood.

**Definitions: What is Praxeology?**

For us, ‘praxeology’ describes the theory and study of ‘praxis’ (defined by Freire (1970) as ‘reflection on, and in, human action’), and embeds this in a situated context in which power and ethics are fundamentally realised and explored in an attempt to engage in participatory practice to better understand human actions, and in our view, to transform them. We have always aimed to realise praxis in our research, but we now prefer this Greek neologism, ‘praxeology’, as a better descriptor of our developing research paradigm in which we are especially foregrounding issues of power and ethics in the way we work in a participatory relationship with our collaborators. We are also committed within our wider research community to make praxeological research not only more understood, rigorous and systematic in its enactment, but also more appropriate, purposeful and relevant to people’s lives within their early childhood contexts. We want to set our own substantive research in early childhood into this paradigm, to explore its history and demonstrate its usefulness and trustworthiness to the research community (Guba and Lincoln,1985). We are keen to describe a research stance which offers an alternative to, but not a substitute for, large scale positivist research studies and randomised controlled trials, which also are progressing. In this, we are not dismissing the importance of other paradigms but expressing a desire to explore and refocus on different models which are in essence participatory, democratic, and are often ‘situated’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in ‘messy’ and ‘chaotic’ contexts (McNiff, 2010), which is the ‘real world of social science’ (Robson, 2002). As Joao and Julia Formosinho (2012, this volume) also point out, praxeological research represents an important contribution towards a social science of the social. We also believe that praxeological research has at its heart an intention for social and political transformation. Realising these intentions requires practising praxeologists to engage in deep reflexivity and to adopt rigorous methodological processes.
This praxeological paradigm, we will argue, fits the ethos of European early childhood theory and its underpinning values (Bruce, 2005), its traditions of social welfare and well being (Esping-Andersen, 1990) and its resistance to the ‘commodification’ of childhood (Cook, 2004). The focus on praxis is thus not simply about everyday practicalities, professional development, competencies, skills or outcomes, but about deeper concepts, reflexivity, processes, actions and interactions whilst being deeply cognoscente of environments of power and values. Praxeology leads not to the singularity and comparative hierarchy of ‘best’ practice models but promotes Joy Goodman’s (2001) notion of ‘wise practice’, that is, a selection of professional responses which are considered, flexible and chosen as appropriate to context.

Theoretical and conceptual roots

A review of the history of practice-based and participatory research reveals a respected pedigree of pioneers from whom we have learned. Those, like us, who practice it today are standing on the shoulders of giants such as von Mises (1949) who developed Espinas’ (1890) notion of praxeology. To paraphrase von Mises’ concept of praxeology, real-world observation allows you to adopt axioms (truths) and use verbal arguments to develop these into theorems. A theorem is simply a statement that has been proven on the basis of previously established statements. Assuming the axioms in use at any time apply to the real world problem in question, then the theorems will also apply. In this sense, praxeology is formally a science. Von Mises was a mathematician and Espinas an historian but both saw praxeology and real world observation of the particular and situated as an essential element of scientific discovery. Both recognised in the unpredictability of human behaviour the need to look systematically at local events and solutions. In this emphasis on the human, the individual and the situated there is also empowerment and voice for participants.

In the world of social science research, there is also a long emancipatory history. Freire (1970) who foregrounded participatory practice for change and liberation; Stenhouse (1975) who inspired a generation of teacher researchers; McIntyre (2005) who gave us concepts of virtue ethics; Schön (1983) who promoted ideas of reflective practitioners, Whitehead (1989) and McNiff (2006) who simulated action research and living theories in educational practice; Bourdieu (1998) who gave us theories of practical reason; Wenger (1998) who supported communities of practice; Flyvbjerg (2001), a Danish social planner, and the Norwegian philosopher Eikeland (2008) who developed phronetical social science and finally, Reason and Bradbury (2008) who championed participatory and cooperative inquiry. This short tracing of the roots of this approach reveal that praxeological research has a long and auspicious history to lean on and it fits with our aspirations for early childhood.

Over the years, praxeology has been explored in many disciplines by several European theorists. Interestingly, much of the current debate linking praxeology, phronesis, praxis and wisdom is now taking place within a cutting edge business management context. Writers in this discipline (Bredillet, 2011) are arguing that the development of systems, technology, analysis and quantitative assessment have led to a dehumanising, objectifying influence which stops progress. In this world it is pointed out that, ‘Phronesis balances instrumental rationality with value rationality’ (Flyvbjerg, 2001). For Eikeland, interaction and dialogue in research helps us understand the social and emotional context, ‘phronesis and praxis are intrinsically dialogical and empathetic’ (Eikeland, 2008). The Aristotelian ideas about the characteristics of truth and knowledge, about ‘episteme’, and about the need to balance ‘sophia’ with ‘phronesis’ are topical in European business circles. This dialogue reveals a growing acknowledgement that the world needs not only the sophisticates of academia but also the wisdom, reflections and groundedness of the experienced. ‘Praxeology’ said Espinas was the ‘study of human action’ and we would respectfully add that knowledge of these actions in early childhood is not resident solely in expert elites, but exists all around us if we care to access it, in the perspectives of children, families, practitioners, policy makers and researchers.

Praxeological objectives

Praxeological research operates on two levels with double objectives. Firstly, it aims to produce knowledge and actions which are directly useful to a group of people. Secondly, it seeks to empower people to seek social transformation through a process of constructing and using their own knowledge.

1. The generation of knowledge

Praxeological research is often about the individual and specific case but it always involves and is contextualised by the group and the community. Praxeological research is always situated within a specific context and so embraces localism but it is also democratic and participatory in the wider sense of society. Wenger’s (1998) ideas on ‘communities of practice’, for example, can be seen to underpin and support this social and collaborative approach to knowledge generation. But philosophically and politically, individual liberty as set against the greater good of universalism and the power of the State carries political dangers on the right of neo-liberalism, and on the left of anarchy. Praxeology therefore takes the middle ground and foregrounds participation, voice and democracy, in which individuals are acknowledged but as members of a wider community. Because there is nothing as culturally and individually located; nothing as central to our concept of identity and belonging as our own child rearing practices, early childhood research must recognise and be sensitive to, these core and localised significances and cultural diversities inherent in its field of study. Praxeology is also careful of generalisations and universals and of reducing these complexities to numerical representations which deny people’s plurality. In this research approach, knowledge
is viewed as soundest and most trustworthy when it is co-constructed and validated by those who are in the field of inquiry. It purports that knowledge can be localised and yet still be authentic, genuine, be meaningful and have transferability.

2. Liberation and transformation
The Freirean concept of ‘praxis’ is essentially political in that it seeks to explore ‘the study of practice’ with all its concomitants of avoiding ‘domesticity’ in thinking by establishing a critical stance of self awareness and self critique. This allows the creation of highly relevant but personalised and individualised libraries of the world’s knowledge and thinking. Praxeology embraces this emphasis on the importance of inclusionary paradigms and research methodologies which recognise the value of the polyphonic, multi-perspective approach which, in the study of early childhood and families leads to perceiving practitioners, workers, parents, children and policy makers as co-constructors of knowledge about the services and their development. Like McNiff’s (2010) action researchers, praxeology involves an intellectual story of adventurers, encouraging leaders, explorers and risk takers working at the cutting edge of understanding and knowledge creation, in a Vygotskyian zone of development, embedded in a culture of transformation, which is forged by new integrated and cross-cultural, cross-paradigm and cross-disciplinary collaborations. The wider understandings which grow from these fertile participatory conditions is often messy but this ‘chaos’, as Gladwell (2006) suggests, permits the creative emergence of new methodologies and concepts. Much of this road has been travelled before but Reason and Bradbury (2008) suggest an added resonance recently, claiming we are witnessing,

‘an emerging worldview, more holistic, pluralist and egalitarian that is eventually participative. This worldview sees human beings as co-creating their reality through participation, through their experience, their imagination and intuition, their thinking and their action. This participative worldview is at the heart of inquiry methodologies that emphasise participation as a core strategy’

In the US, there is a new concern for grounded early childhood research, from the ‘bottom-up, not top-down’ as Lilian Katz (2012) says. Martha Zaslow, Director of the Office of Policy and Communications for the Society for Research in Child Development also recently stated,

'We’re in the middle of a conceptual shift. We’ve had a very long-standing assumption that knowledge-focused professional development—meaning coursework and training—would suffice to yield changes in practice and quality. We’re standing it on its head now, and beginning to say: if you want to change practice and quality, you need to begin by directly intervening with practice.'

Zaslow et al (2010)

We suggest that there are many possibilities for ‘intervening with practice’ in order to transform and improve people’s lives but we feel that profound change should and does grow from experience to conceptualisation and not the other way round. For example, Barnett’s (2011) recent work examining what had and had not worked in State funded early intervention programmes in the US which aimed to transform children’s life chances, suggests that the nature of professional development offered to early childhood practitioners was a key factor in the success of an intervention. His work showed that initiatives which focused on developing practitioner knowledge, within a participatory action research approach, led to specific shifts in practice and these had the greatest impact in enhancing children’s lives chances. The potential role and power of praxeological research is being to be realised.

How is praxeology practised?
Praxeological research is seen to be fundamentally participatory, democratic and collaborative in its nature and therefore in early childhood we believe it is best practised by those who are committed and close to the real world of children and families. From this description, it is clear that this approach is eminently suited to practitioner researchers, who are in a unique position to make an important contribution to the evolution of knowledge in the field of their professional practice. Their particular value lies in their positionality, close to the site of professional action. The approach is profoundly political in that it attempts to redistribute power in the generation of knowledge and encourages practitioners and those with whom they interact, including parents and children, to be in control of their own lives and contexts, and to actively participate in the transformation of these. Early childhood practitioners operate at the interface of service users (children and parents), work organisations and policy. The knowledge they generate for application in their own work is also transferable to other practice situations and has we believe the potential to achieve change that will enhance the quality of lives of both children and parents in the practitioners own work setting and, if well documented and disseminated, beyond to the wider community of practice. It also provides a vehicle for the frontline practitioner to have a voice in their own right and to democratise and give voice to those who are often absent from decision making opportunities, especially young children and their parents.

Praxeological enquiry fundamentally is about those involved in the delivery of a service deeply questioning ‘how’ and ‘why’ things are done. It is about those involved systematically gathering evidence to gain a greater knowledge of their own and others impact on the services that they offer and giving them a greater knowledge,
understanding and confidence to make constructive changes for the better. It is always grounded in real world situations and acknowledges the unpredictability of human beings and their interactions with their world. It does not attempt to control in or out aspects or elements of reality but tries to see the complexity of a situation as a whole and to capture the reality of its ‘messiness’ and ‘chaos’ but in a systematic and rigorous way. It is most usually carried out by practitioners (anyone involved in practice) who work within the situation to be studied and who know the context well and have a direct and emotional investment in what is being studied. It is research that is done with people in context and NOT to people, and it is always done in the company of others, seeing the social world of practice as dependent on relationships and interactions. It uses and generates theories of action to reveal the underlying assumptions we have about our work – to discover why we do what we do.

A further quality of praxeological research is that it is based on a strong ethical code of action with the express aim of actively encouraging the participation of those involved in the early years context, including children and parents, giving them voice and power in the research process. At its heart is a process of critical self evaluation, reflection and action (praxis) with the guiding purpose of advancing practice and supporting practitioners to develop a more profound understanding of their work, and, therefore, a more effective delivery of services to children and families. In short, it is action based and transformational for the settings and the people involved in the delivery and receipt of services. As Jean McNiff (2010 p6) points out, it involves, “a strategy that helps you to live in the way you feel is a good way. It helps you to live out the things you believe in (your values); and it enables you to give reasons every step of the way.”

Praxeological research can adopt many different research designs eg action research, ethnographic research, case study, life storying, but establishing rigour and trustworthiness in its execution is critically important. McNiff (2010) argues that it is part of a transition from ‘traditional scholarship’ to what is now called ‘new scholarship’, and this requires different criteria by which to judge its quality. In this new scholarship, the old technical criteria which judged the worth or value of data through statistical reliability and validity checks need to be supplemented by more qualitative, experiential criteria which should be given equal status and credence. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that establishing the trustworthiness or dependability of any research study is important to evaluating its worth. For them trustworthiness involves establishing:

- **Credibility** - confidence in the ‘truth’ of the findings
- **Transferability** - showing that the findings have applicablity in other contexts
- **Dependability** - showing that the findings are consistent and could be repeated
- **Confirmability** - a degree of neutrality or the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the respondents and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest.

Guba and Lincoln (2005) also describe a series of techniques that can be used to conduct qualitative research that achieves the criteria they outline, such as prolonged engagement; persistent observation; triangulation; peer debriefing; member-checking; thick description, research audit trail; reflexivity; impact.

**What are the underpinning principles of an ethical and political Praxeologist?**

We have argued that a central feature of praxeological research is a clear and visible ethical code with an underlying value base which is transparent, well articulated and understood by those involved in the action. This ethical code also makes the distribution and use of power within any context a central concern. These values and power dynamics shape epistemological and ontological perspectives, and in turn these generate a set of principles which are used to guide the research process. These principles also provide a check on the decisions made during the course of the research. We offer six guiding principles for the praxeological researcher:

| Principle 1: PR is ethical, moral and values driven/committed |
| Principle 2: PR is democratic, participatory, inclusionary, collaborative, empowering, aiming to redistribute power more equitably |
| Principle 3: PR is critical, risky, courageous and political, with a concern for social justice and equity |
| Principle 4: PR is subjective, acknowledging of multiple perspectives |
| Principle 5: PR is highly systematic and methodologically rigorous |
| Principle 6: PR is action based, educational, useful, creative and transformational, generating and sharing learning in a dynamic and continuous cycle of praxis |
Living out this set of ethical principles requires the praxeological researcher to be essentially and radically egalitarian. They emphasise the role of participation and self direction in the progress of developing knowledge. They also require a deep commitment to social transformation. Taking this demanding agenda forward with integrity is challenging and we should acknowledge that the participatory research conducted to date, including that done by ourselves, has only been partially successful in this respect. In our own work this critique has caused us to look at projects in which we have been involved, such as the Effective Early learning (EEL) Programme, the Accounting Early for Life Long Learning (AcE) Programme and the Children Crossing Borders (CCB) Project and to ask some deeper, reflective and critical questions about how authentically democratic and participatory we had been in this work and how transformative its impact has really been for those involved. Some of the questions we have asked ourselves more recently are set out in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Praxeological Questions and Possibilities

**Authentic Participative Research Practice: Praxeological Possibilities**

There has been a well articulated critique of the participatory approach, led by such writers as Cooke and Kothari (2001), which has sharpened our critical thinking and has pointed out that the demand for participatory practice can lead to the unjust and illegitimate exercise of power and that there has often been a gulf between promising empowerment and what happens in actuality. This critique uses the emotive phrase the ‘tyranny of participation’. Proponents of this critique argue that participatory research has tended to “romanticize the goodness and democratic tendencies of the people and to ignore the ways in which all groups may be destructive and distort their experience. In its emphasis on the sharing of power, it has failed to consider seriously the ways in which leaders of democratic movements must develop personally and learn to exercise transforming power,” (Reason, 1994).

In response to this critique, the research debate has been extended to take up this challenge, (see Hickey and Mohan,2004) and offer a more optimistic and transformational agenda. Taking this on, we can see in the emerging praxeological worldview an increased emphasis on developing a more coherent, and potentially transformative, participatory approach to inquiry, which moves beyond the alleged failures of past practice to redefine how participation might be more realistically achieved over a more sustained timeframe.

In this recasting of participatory practice, however, lies a paradox, and one which Freire (1970) identified in his emancipatory and liberationalist theories. The paradox is that social transformation requires leadership and in the early stages, this leadership may need to be drawn from what is perceived as an elite group who can straddle both old and new practices and cultures. As Reason and Bradbury (2008, p324) point out, “participation cannot occur without the initiative of someone with time, skill and commitment, and that someone will almost inevitably be a member of a privileged educated group”.

Participatory practice in research seems to sit uneasily with this notion that leadership is required. This leads us back to a key element in the praxeological worldview: that ethics and power have to be central aspects of any human process and need to be visible and handled with integrity and morality. The exercise of power is not necessarily a bad thing if it is done within an ethical and moral code. Thus, our more recent foregrounding of the central importance of ethics and power in praxis which we now view as core to our participatory approach, and the attraction of a praxeological paradigm to deepen and develop this work.
Skills and characteristics of the praxeologist
We are led therefore to a key characteristic of a praxeological researcher: they have to be able to practice transformational leadership within their inquiry. This demands the skilled and ethical exercise of power in order to move towards the development of more democratic systems, and this needs a commitment of both time and emotion. Freire (1970) in his seminal work also pointed out the fundamental role of the individual who may come from the ‘oppressor class’ but who is committed to work alongside, and in unity and humility with, the oppressed on a shared journey of consciousness raising and liberation. Freire argues that those who authentically commit to this kind of democratic, participatory learning must examine themselves constantly. To carry out this role, Freire believes demands a ‘profound rebirth’ and a new form of existence for such educators and investigators, which he calls ‘revolutionary leadership’. These investigators are committed to social transformation through a process of conscientisation of those with whom they are working. This demands that the investigators (or researchers) are committed to a deep involvement in the real world in which they study, with an authentic desire to redistribute power in favour of the silenced and domesticated, in order that they might actively participate in its transformation.

Those of us committed to a praxeological worldview must recognize that many groups are alienated from the process of knowledge creation and may feel caught in a culture of silence. To change this requires transformational leadership and a process of participatory inquiry which is an emergent process, that participants initially may need to be led through, and amend and develop further in the light of their own experience, before they finally embrace it as their own. Our experience has shown that participation is not something that is a gift to be endowed at a particular point in time, but rather is a process which may require a struggle OVER time towards full realization. This kind of participatory practice takes extended timeframes, in which experience and trust develop through sustained, authentic dialogue between the investigators and the people they wish to serve. As Reason (1994) points out, this tension, or living paradox, is something praxeological researchers have to live with and commit to, continually seeking creative solutions in order to move forward in the generation of new knowledge, understandings and meanings – it requires a new way of being.

In summary, to realise authentic participatory research, the skilled modern praxeologist needs to develop a range of skills which are very different from those engaged in more orthodox research. These skills lie at the heart of transformational research leadership and include:

- Personal skills of self awareness and self critique
- Facilitative skills in interpersonal and group settings
- Political and ethical skills
- Intellectual skills
- Knowledge co-creation and knowledge transfer skills.

Most of all they need humility, the capacity to trust and to be a participant themselves.

Praxeological methods
Given the ambitions and challenges discussed, we believe praxeological research must also recognise the need to extend the range of voices and explore different ways of doing, reporting and discussing research. In this way it can enhance its potential to reveal greater complexity and richness in the context by inviting multiple levels of engagement in the research process which are at the same time cognitive, emotional and multi-sensory. The praxeologist needs to have the courage to innovate and experiment as a researcher and go beyond traditional and orthodox research methods in order to encourage silenced people to find ways to tell and thus reclaim their own story. So, while praxeological research might use orthodox research methods such as interviews, case studies, life biographies, questionnaires, observations and so on, there is a clear move among praxeological researchers, including ourselves, to consider storytelling, drawing, painting, song, dance, poetry, photography, film making, socio-drama, mime and plays in their methodological toolbox. It is claimed that this wider range of expressive activity enriches the research and provides complexity and depth, thus allowing a richer vein of knowledge and understandings to be made visible. It also provides a means through which ordinary people may express, experience and validate the data being generated. We believe that these different forms of expression and representation can provide a more authentic account of the research and unmask some of the often hidden aspects of understanding and meaning which flow from the research action and evidence. A serious case is being made by people such as Reason and Bradbury (2008) that these alternative and expressive forms of knowing need to be taken more seriously in our research designs if we are to see more inclusive, democratic, participatory and intense forms of inquiry in the future.

Strengths and limitations of praxeological research
Praxeological research is only one of a range of useful approaches to evidence gathering in the early years and has, of course, both strengths and limitations. Praxeological research is fundamentally focused on finding out more about practice and exploring what works and why from the front line, and using this knowledge to transform realities. To date, much of the evidence that has informed practice has been imposed from external sources but this approach radically shifts this perspective and attempts to gain from the development of evidence and a literature that originates
within the real world of practice, through the active and authentic participation of those involved generating their own agendas for further exploration, enquiry and change. Key strengths in this approach are that those involved in practice themselves identify ways to improve their world and take responsibility for this action, inspiring and generating collaborative learning and action. It is able to give a close account of what works, how and why, thus ensuring credibility and utility in the real world of practice. And finally, and critically for those who work with young children and families, it has an ethical and values transparent stance.

The limitations of practitioner research are acknowledged. It necessarily focuses on specific contexts and smaller numbers and its transferability is therefore scoped by the research context. It is also not able, nor does it set out, to show cause and effect, or to support comparisons or predictions. It also takes time, deep attachment and ongoing commitment, which is not always possible to dedicate to the pursuit of knowledge. Mistakenly, this kind of research is sometimes seen to have less credibility and utility to guide policy decisions due to lack of perceived rigour in method. This latter limitation, we feel, is often due more to misrepresentation than reality.

Where does praxeology sit? Issues of status, credibility, utility and power

So, given its growing profile and visibility within the sector, where does participatory, praxeological research currently sit in the status league table of research approaches? Historically, participatory and practice focused research has had low status and low visibility at policy level BUT at practice level it has always had high involvement, high utility and high impact. We believe that this ranking of honour in the research world is changing and the shift can be seen in the visibility, credibility and power of practice based research which is evident in its profile in recent conferences, research projects, international publications and policy debates.

We are seeing the development of practitioner research centres and communities of practice across the UK, in well established centres such as the Centre for Research in Early Childhood (CREC) in Birmingham and the Pen Green Research and Leadership Centre in Corby. These centres are also creating new generations of practitioner researchers working supporting new centres of practitioner research, as shown by the designation of twelve new Teaching Children’s Centres in England. Internationally, Centres such as the Braga based Children’s Association and the Belgium Centre for Experiential Learning with Ferre Laevers and his team are having similar impact. These developing Centres offer more forums for deliberation and debate about early years practice and policy and the generation of knowledge. They create new spaces for ethical association, which offer open, inclusive and safe learning communities which aspire to be developmental and innovative. They support professional interaction based on mutual respect, shared curiosity and humanity and encourage the development of ‘Communities of Practice’ throughout the sector.

However, we believe that a further shift needs to happen if these practice based and participatory research centres are to realise their true potential. Praxeological research is one example of a range of innovative ways of conducting early years’ research we can see emerging and which are changing traditional frames, research processes and practices. New spaces for intellectual engagement are rapidly opening up and allowing early year’s research to move forward and take its place at the high table of policy decision making. It is increasingly acknowledged that policy and practice need to be open to multiple ways of knowing and using research and practice. This climate is leading to more open, critical engagement developing between the research paradigm camps and more respect, congruence, innovation and democracy in early years research is evident as a result.

We believe we have to shift our own worldview, and inspire others, to reflect more critically on how to more authentically realize the participatory practice we strive for. This requires courage, risk taking, and further innovation, alongside a more rigorous and critical engagement in the redistribution of power and the living out of ethics. This shift could give us the chance to achieve more open, inclusive, democratic research that has the capacity to answer the deeper questions we face in developing ECEC in the 21st century.

References


