

Multi-agency working with children and families: a focus on facilitators and using activity theory principles to explore this topic area

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**Alexia Gillen**

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Doctorate in Applied Educational Psychology

School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences

## **Over-arching Abstract**

This document comprises three main sections: a systematic literature review, a linking document and an empirical research study.

***Systematic Literature Review:*** The systematic literature review focuses on multi-agency working and considers this within its political context. The review of literature identifies factors which facilitate multi-agency working.

Consideration is also given to factors which cause barriers to effective multi-agency working. The review focuses on bringing together qualitative and quantitative data from a range of studies exploring a variety of established multi-agency teams and community-wide projects in the UK and USA; a total of eight studies were included for in-depth review. Studies included for review investigated issues relating to professional working practice, and measured outcomes for children and families and outcomes for professionals. Findings identified 12 themes considered to be facilitators to multi-agency working. The review concluded that the majority of research in this area focused on services delivered to young children (below the age of three) and on good practice when establishing a multi-agency team; therefore, it would be beneficial for future research to focus on other age groups and on established teams to determine effective ways of working.

***Linking Document:*** The linking document provides information on the research journey; it considers theoretical and ideological underpinnings to the empirical research and details research rationale.

***Empirical Research Study:*** The empirical research study investigates effective working practice within an established multi-agency team delivering services to vulnerable primary school-aged children and their families. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather the perceptions of professionals working in the multi-agency team, school staff and the families being supported by the team. Activity theory principles were applied as a framework to guide data generation and analysis. The focus of the study was on facilitative elements of the multi-agency process; six broad supportive themes were identified along with five broad constraining themes. Findings support previous research in this area and provide valuable information to consider how multi-agency teams delivered to vulnerable children and their families can be developed.

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**A systematic review of the factors  
that facilitate multi-agency  
professionals in working together  
to support vulnerable children  
and their families**

## **1.1 Abstract**

This systematic review of literature explores the factors that facilitate professionals in working together to support vulnerable children and their families. Consideration is also given to factors which pose a barrier to effective multi-agency working. The review focuses on bringing together qualitative and quantitative data from a range of studies exploring a variety of established multi-agency teams and community-wide projects in the UK and USA; a total of eight studies were included for in-depth review. Studies included for review investigated issues relating to professional working practice, and measured outcomes for children and families and outcomes for professionals. Findings identified 12 themes considered to be facilitators to multi-agency working. The review concluded that the majority of research in this area focused on services delivered to very young children (below the age of three) and on good practice when establishing a multi-agency team; therefore, it would be beneficial for future research to focus on other age groups and on established teams to determine effective ways of joined-up working.

## **1.2 Introduction**

### ***1.2.1 Vulnerable Children / Social Exclusion***

Community programmes designed to improve the functioning of disadvantaged neighbourhoods and the families living there are currently very popular with the UK government (Jack, 2005). Although there is considerable knowledge about the causes of disadvantage in UK communities little is known about the role of community programmes in addressing these inequalities. Existing evidence tends to be from other parts of the world, particularly the USA (Friedman et al., 2007) or to be in the early stages of evaluation in the UK (Bagley, Ackerley, & Rattray, 2004; Melhuish et al., 2007). What is known about the effectiveness of community programmes highlights difficulties in the design and implementation of such programmes in relation to appropriate interventions and achieving successful collaborative partnership working between agencies, professionals and local people.



### **1.2.2 Multi-Agency Working**

New Labour's victory in the 1997 election embedded the concept of collaboration and partnership working in children's services as core government philosophy (Barnes, 2008; Frost & Robinson, 2007; Robinson & Cottrell, 2005; Sloper, 2004). The main reason for this drive towards collaborative working can be attributed to high levels of poverty and social exclusion that existed in Britain, following nearly two decades of Conservative Party governance (Milbourne, Macrae, & Maguire, 2003).

There are numerous examples of recent UK government policy that seek to put children and their families at the centre of care planning with agencies working together around them to deliver care. Monumental in recent policy change is the public enquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié (Laming, 2003) and other official criticisms of the existing child protection system (Department of Health, 2002). Subsequent recommendations include the development of children's trusts, bringing together social, health and education services for children, and the appointment of an independent children's commissioner in England, to complement similar appointments in the other countries of the UK. The government has also made a commitment to ending child poverty and has placed a duty on local authorities to promote the well-being of all children and young people under Children Act, 2004, as well as funding community programmes like Sure Start and the Children's Fund. The Children Act (2004) introduced legislation in England and Wales that insisted on multi-agency collaboration. In addition to legislation, since 1997 there has been a number of government programmes, for example, Education Action Zones, Health Action Zones and New Deal which adopt an inter-agency approach to tackle social exclusion.

The recent drive towards integrated working to improve outcomes for children and young people came about because of the feeling that fragmentation and 'working in silos' can result in uncoordinated and less effective support for families (Hymans, 2006). Despite the government's rhetoric, practice remains variable. Although little research exists about this major policy shift (Jack, 2005; Robinson & Cottrell, 2005), that which does exist, continually highlights the lack of multi-agency working, scarcity of key workers in services and a general trend

that services for children remain fragmented (Hymans, 2006). Advice and guidance as to how these services can be best implemented is not forthcoming (Anning, 2005).

### **1.2.3 What is multi-agency working?**

Non-statutory guidance to *Every Child Matters: Change for children (Common core of skills and knowledge for the children's workforce)* (DfES, 2004), states (p.18):

*Multi-agency working is about different services, agencies and teams of professionals and other staff working together to provide the services that fully meet the needs of children, young people and their parents or carers. To work successfully on a multi-agency basis you need to be clear about your own role and aware of the roles of other professionals; you need to be confident about your own standards and targets and respectful of those that apply to other services, actively seeking and respecting the knowledge and input others can make to delivering best outcomes for children and young people.*

For the purpose of this review, multi-agency working refers to any aspect of work, in an educational, health or community setting, that involves professionals from more than one agency working together.

Current research neither offers a common language to describe collaboration nor provides consistent messages as to how to address these issues (Horwath & Morrison, 2007). However, there is some consistency in factors identified as either barriers or facilitators to multi-agency working. A brief overview is given in the following two paragraphs; further discussion of these continues throughout the review.

Literature identifies many **barriers** to the development of effective multi-agency working including:

- different knowledge bases, cultures and style of working, and power relationships between agencies, professionals and volunteers (e.g. Bagley, et al., 2004; Horwath & Morrison, 2007; Webb & Vulliamy, 2001);
- lack of appropriate training (e.g. Magrab, Evans, & Hurrell, 1997);
- funding and resources (e.g. Atkinson, Doherty, & Kinder, 2005; Barnes, 2008; Sloper, 2004)
- roles and responsibilities (e.g. Atkinson, et al., 2005; Sloper, 2004)

- competing priorities and a lack of clarity on aims (e.g. Atkinson, et al., 2005; Sloper, 2004);
- communication and information sharing (e.g. Atkinson, et al., 2005; Barnes, 2008; Sloper, 2004);
- support from management (e.g. Atkinson, et al., 2005; Sloper, 2004);
- short-term projects that do not allow time to overcome professional or agency inflexibilities (e.g. Milbourne, 2005);
- a lack of recognition about skills, time and energy required to establish relationships (e.g. Milbourne, 2005);
- and personal qualities (e.g. Barnes, 2008).

**Facilitators** to effective multi-agency working include:

- the importance of user consultation and participation in the development of services (e.g. Glass, 1999);
- commitment and willingness to be involved (e.g. Atkinson, et al., 2005);
- understanding roles and responsibilities (e.g. Atkinson, et al., 2005; Sloper, 2004);
- common aims and objectives (e.g. Atkinson, et al., 2005; Sloper, 2004);
- communication and information sharing (e.g. Atkinson, et al., 2005; Sloper, 2004);
- leadership or drive (e.g. Atkinson, et al., 2005);
- involving the relevant personnel (e.g. Atkinson, et al., 2005);
- sharing and access to funding and resources (e.g. Atkinson, et al., 2005);
- timetables agreed between partners (e.g. Sloper, 2004);
- commitment at all levels of the organisations (e.g. Sloper, 2004);
- staff training and support (e.g. Sloper, 2004);
- personal qualities and logistical factors (e.g. Barnes, 2008).

Facilitators and barriers to multi-agency working identified in the literature highlight that in some cases these are opposites to each other i.e. the barriers represent a lack of factors identified as facilitators (Sloper, 2004). However, this is not always the case, for example, short-term projects are identified as a barrier to multi-agency working yet long-term projects do not feature in literature as a facilitator to multi-agency working. Further information on professionals'

perspectives of factors which have potential to facilitate multi-agency working can be found in a comprehensive literature review of 38 studies conducted by Watson (2006).

#### **1.2.4 The focus of this review**

Although there is a growing body of literature in this area, further exploration is still necessary. Firstly, reviews are needed which bring together information about multi-agency working in relation to the most vulnerable children and their families. Secondly, there appears to be a larger proportion of literature focused on children in the early years (0-5 years) with little focus on primary and secondary aged children. Thirdly, most of the literature on multi-agency working describes it in the context of a single project or initiative where agencies come together to address a specific issue or concern (Atkinson, et al., 2005); there has been little focus on broad models or types of multi-agency working. This review will focus on bringing together qualitative and quantitative data from a range of studies exploring a variety of established multi-agency teams and community-wide projects.

### **1.3 Method**

The systematic method described by Petticrew & Roberts (2006) was utilised in this review. The different stages are summarised in Table 1.

<b>1</b>	Clearly define the review question (in consultation with anticipated users) Relevant Local Authority representatives were consulted about the topic area and it was agreed that the review would focus on multi-agency teams delivering services in educational settings as this was to be the focus of the empirical research.
<b>2</b>	Determine the types of studies needed to answer the question
<b>3</b>	Carry out a comprehensive literature search to locate these studies
<b>4</b>	Screen the studies found using inclusion criteria to identify studies for in-depth review
<b>5</b>	Critically appraise studies for quality and relevance
<b>6</b>	Synthesise studies' findings
<b>7</b>	Communicate outcomes for the review Outcomes from the review were communicated to relevant LA representatives (those consulted in step 1 of the process) and were considered in relation to the empirical research and the implications the outcomes had for initial planning stages of the research.

**Table 1: The systematic review stages (adapted from Petticrew & Roberts, 2006)**

### **1.3.1 Identifying and describing studies: The initial search**

An electronic database search was executed, using the search terms displayed in Table 2, to locate relevant studies. Search terms were generated by perusing previous studies in the broad area of multi-agency working. Search terms for the target group: vulnerable children and their families initially included the terms 'vulnerable children' and 'vulnerable families' but was extended to include the terms 'social exclusion' and 'socially disadvantaged' after government websites ([www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk)) indicated that these descriptors are frequently used to describe this group.

<b>Practice area</b>	Multi-agency / joint working / multidisciplinary / interdisciplinary / team working
<b>Subjects</b>	Vulnerable children / vulnerable families / social exclusion / socially disadvantaged
<b>Intervention</b>	Intervention / treatment / support / training / therapy

**Table 2: Literature search terms**

The following electronic databases were searched: British Education Index, CSA Illumina, ERIC (Educational Resource Index and Abstracts), Informaworld, JSTOR, Ovid Medline, Science Direct, Scopus, Web of Knowledge, and Wiley-Blackwell Journals. Databases were selected according to those identified as specific to 'Educational Psychology' by Newcastle University library. Searches were conducted between July-September 2009.

Inclusion criteria were set to determine the studies to be included for more in-depth review (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). The following were used for initial screening of studies identified in the literature search:

- **PARTICIPANTS:**

*Children and families:* Initially, this was set to primary school aged children between 4-11 years. However, due to a lack of literature including this age group, the criterion was expanded to include children and young people between 0-18 years.

*Professionals:* any professional working in a multi-agency team delivering services to children and their families.

- **SETTINGS:** Any (school, home, community). Initially only UK countries were included but this was expanded to include USA due to insufficient literature.
- **INTERVENTION:** This involved a multi-agency intervention implemented either to support children and their families, the settings they were in (e.g. schools or community settings) or among the professionals working with the children and their families.
- **STUDY DESIGN:** studies which aimed to investigate barriers and facilitators to multi-agency working with vulnerable children and their families were included.
- **TIME, PLACE and LANGUAGE:** Studies were reported in English, and published between 1997 and 2009 because few studies researched multi-agency working prior to 1997. 23 studies were identified that met initial inclusion criteria.

### ***1.3.2 Identifying and describing studies: The in-depth review***

Additional inclusion criteria were applied to the 23 studies identified in the initial literature search to identify those to be included in the in-depth review:

- **PARTICIPANTS:**  
*Children and families:* studies including groups of children and young people (and their families) in the following age groups were included: 0-5 years, 5-11 years, and 11-14 years.  
*Professionals:* see Appendix A for a list of professionals included in the studies.
- **SETTINGS:** no additional criteria.
- **INTERVENTION:** studies which involved multi-agency working in educational settings were included. Those involving multi-agency working in health-based initiatives or other areas were not included as the focus for the review was on educational settings.
- **STUDY DESIGN:** no additional criteria.
- **TIME, PLACE and LANGUAGE:** studies published in peer-reviewed journals accessible through Newcastle University (unpublished dissertations were excluded).

All 23 studies were included after initial searching following screening of title, abstracts and keywords. In the second stage, the full screening of the articles against additional inclusion criteria identified eight studies for in-depth review.

#### **1.3.4 Detailed description of studies in the in-depth review**

Studies identified as meeting the in-depth inclusion criteria were analysed according to study aims and research question(s), study design, methods of analysis and data collection, and outcomes. This was then summarised in tabular form to give more detailed information about the following:

- Participants: numbers and, where possible, ages
- Study Context: context (home, school, community) and geographical location of study
- Purpose: the reason why the study was conducted, for example, to examine relationships between variables or to produce a description of a state of affairs
- Study method: details of the study design
- Intervention: where applicable, details of the intervention that was being evaluated or described
- Data collection: whether the study involved qualitative, quantitative or a mixture of both kinds of data
- Outcome measures: an overview of the areas that were being measured or evaluated in each study

Information was organised into the above categories to enable easier comparison between studies included for in-depth review.

#### **1.3.5 Assessing quality of studies and weight of evidence (WoE)**

Studies selected for in-depth review were subjected to intense scrutiny to establish the overall quality and relevance of each study to the review. The Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Coordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre) weight of evidence (WoE) tool was used and studies were assessed against the following criteria:

- A. Soundness of studies (internal methodological coherence), based upon the study only

- B. Appropriateness of the research design and analysis used for answering the review question
- C. Relevance of the study topic focus (from the sample, measures, scenario, or other indicator of the focus of the study) to the review question
- D. An overall weight, taking into account A, B and C.

## **1.4 Results**

### ***1.4.1 General characteristics of the studies included in the in-depth review***

A summary of the studies included for in-depth review is shown in Table 3. The process of summarising studies involved applying coding criteria to the studies. This table indicates that seven of the eight studies included in the in-depth review were conducted in the UK with the remaining one being conducted in USA. Four studies investigated issues related to professionals, two studies measured outcomes for children and their families and the remaining two studies looked at both outcomes for professionals and children and their families. The study contexts include five community-based projects: three Sure Start Local Programmes (established to improve the well-being of children aged 0-3 years and their families living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods), Children and Parents Service (CAPS) (a city-wide multi-agency, early intervention service to children and families); and the Bridgeport Safe Start Initiative (designed to reduce fragmentation to deliver integrated services to families of young children exposed to or at risk of exposure to family violence). One study was a school-based intervention and the remaining two investigated joined-up working in existing multi-agency teams. Two of the multi-agency teams in the eight studies selected for in-depth review included Educational Psychologists.

Sample sizes varied hugely across all studies. Two studies included entire populations of children and their families in a particular age range within the area in which the study was conducted with the largest group being 12575 nine-month olds and their families. Where stated, remaining studies included participants ranging from 18 to 46 professionals.



### **1.4.2 Experimental design of the studies included in the in-depth review**

Six studies were conducted as an ‘exploration of relationships’; this type of study examines relationships and/or statistical associations between variables to build theories and develop hypotheses. These studies generally describe process/processes to explore how a particular state of affairs might be produced, maintained or changed. Two studies used mixed-methods and four studies used qualitative methods. The exploration of relationships studies used the following study designs to collect data:

- *Views study* – the researchers use this method when trying to understand phenomena from the point of the ‘worldview’ of a particular group, culture or society. In these studies there is attention to subjective meaning, perspectives and experience.
- *Cohort study*: researchers prospectively study a sample, collect data on the different aspects of policies or practices experienced by members of the sample, look forward in time to measure their later outcomes and relate experiences to achieved outcomes. The purpose is to assess the effect of different experiences on outcomes.

The remaining two studies (from the eight identified for in-depth review) were designed to investigate ‘what works’. These studies aimed to measure the effectiveness of specific interventions on a defined sample of recipients or subjects in the programme or intervention. Both of these studies used quantitative methods of data collection. One of these studies was a non-randomised control trial with three different groups in the study, two being control groups; the other study was a statistical survey study – this method uses questionnaire to collect quantitative information about items in a sample or population. Both studies used pre/post testing techniques to measure effectiveness.

### **1.4.3 Weight of Evidence**

EPPI-Centre guidelines were used to give all eight included studies an overall weight of evidence (summarised in Table 4). My decisions, detailed in the synthesis Table, indicate that all eight studies are considered medium or medium/high in overall weight of evidence (D). Although some studies provided higher ratings in other categories (Bagley, et al., 2004; Barclay & Kerr, 2006;

Robinson & Cottrell, 2005) their overall rating was affected by their small sample size and specificity of their sample (often being one specific group of professionals or one particular location). The subjective element of this WoE tool is acknowledged; ratings are based on the judgements I made about the studies when the four elements of the tool (A, B, C & D) were considered. Recognition is given to the fact that others may have interpreted the quality of the studies differently. Overall judgement, indicated in column D, represents an amalgamation of judgements made for A, B and C.

	<b>A</b> (Trustworthy in terms of own question)	<b>B</b> (Appropriate design and analysis for this review question)	<b>C</b> (Relevance of focus to review question)	<b>D</b> (Overall weight in relation to review question)
Bagley et al (2004)	High	Medium/High	Medium	Medium
Barclay & Kerr (2006)	High	High	Medium	Medium/High
Edgley & Avis (2007)	Medium/High	Medium	Medium	Medium
Fazel et al (2009)	Medium/High	High	High	Medium/High
Friedman et al (2007)	Medium/High	Medium/High	Medium	Medium
Melhuish et al (2007)	Medium/High	Medium/Low	Medium	Medium
Robinson & Cottrell (2005)	High	Medium	Medium	Medium
White & Verduyn (2006)	Medium	Medium	Medium/High	Medium

**Table 3: Weight of evidence**

**Table 4: Coding of studies included for in-depth review**

Study	Participants	N	Context	Purpose	Study method	Intervention	Data collection	Outcome measure(s)	Results
<b>White &amp; Verduyn (2006)</b>	CAPS – professionals & families involved in the service - all children between the ages of 2-8 in Manchester	Not stated	Children and Parents Service (CAPS) – a citywide multi-agency, early intervention service to children & their families  Location: Manchester, England	<b>Exploration of relationships</b>  Model of service delivery is outlined and obstacles to service implementation and the strategies used to overcome them are discussed	<b>Cohort study</b>	Parent training groups Multi-agency training Liaison in community settings	Not stated	Effectiveness of CAPS intervention project	Government strategy pushes integration of successful delivery models within the community which shape existing services & ensure sustainability – CAPS achieves this through a collaborative framework for service delivery
<b>Melhuish et al (2007)</b>	Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLP) 9 month olds  36 month olds	150  12575  3927	Does variation in SSLPs account for variation in their impact on child/family functioning?  Location: England	<b>What works</b>  Goal: to discover why some programmes may have been more effective than others in promoting child & family well-being	<b>Statistical Survey</b> for parent & child outcomes  <b>Views study</b> for professional outcomes	Sure Start Local Programmes	<b>Self-completion questionnaire</b> – parents  <b>Psychological test</b> – children	SDQ parent scores  BAS cognitive asses scores	Results focused on 4 specific questions.
<b>Edgley &amp; Avis (2007)</b>	statutory providers working within existing mainstream health, education and social care services	18	Sure Start Local Programme  Gather perceptions from multi-agency workers  Location: Nottinghamshire, UK	<b>Exploration of relationships</b>  To explore the extent to which there was a shared agenda and successful collaboration in one Sure Start programme.	<b>Views study</b>	Sure Start services in one Sure Start Local Programme	<b>Focus Group</b> Participants interviewed and data analysed through thematic content analysis	Evaluation of effectiveness of Sure Start project in promoting joint working. Identifies barriers & facilitators to multi-agency working in Sure Start project.	Additional input provided by Sure Start for the most vulnerable families was welcomed but tensions arose over key divergences between the philosophical positions of statutory providers

Study	Participants	N	Context	Purpose	Study method	Intervention	Data collection	Outcome measure(s)	Results
<b>Robinson &amp; Cottrell (2005)</b>	Multi-agency teams working with children	5 teams	Perspectives and experiences of health professionals in multi-agency teams about the impact of multi-agency teamwork on their professional knowledge and learning and on ways of working  Location: UK	<b>Exploration of relationships</b>  To make recommendations about good practice to both those commissioning multi-agency teams and those working in them	<b>Views study</b>	MATch – Multi-Agency Team Work in Services for Children, UK.	Qualitative multi-method approach involving 3 phases: 1. <b>Observation</b> & analysis of documentary evidence about team practice & function 2. <b>Interview</b> and diary keeping 3. <b>Focus Group</b> Evidence was coded using a system grounded in response & based on the theoretical framework.	Identification of barriers/facilitators to effective multi-agency working	5 broad themes emerged from observation & interview data:
<b>Friedman et al (2007)</b>	Agencies delivering Bridgeport services  Key stakeholders in Bridgeport service	46  102 parents 105 providers	Bridgeport Safe Start Initiative  Location: USA	<b>Exploration of relationships</b>  To shed light on approaches and challenges to not only fostering interagency collaboration but also defining and measuring an ideal structure for interagency collaboration in a service delivery system	<b>Statistical survey</b>  <b>Views study</b> – focus group data	Measurement of current inter-agency collaboration	<b>Self-completion questionnaire</b>  <b>Focus Group</b>	Interagency collaboration scale (IACS) - participants surveyed on 3 occasions at 18 month intervals	IACS Network density increased from 1/3 to 4/5 between 2002-05. Paired samples t-test significant increase in density between 1 <sup>st</sup> & 2 <sup>nd</sup> survey rounds but not between 2 <sup>nd</sup> & 3 <sup>rd</sup> .  Focus Group Status of collaboration between agencies in Bridgeport improved over 3 year period.

Study	Participants	N	Context	Purpose	Study method	Intervention	Data collection	Outcome measure(s)	Results
<b>Fazel et al (2009)</b>	Children Teachers		To provide a mental health service to a vulnerable population who were not presenting to local mental health services in significant numbers  Location: Oxford, England	<b>What works</b>  Scores on SDQ were used to assess the effect of the intervention by comparing baseline, follow-up and change scores.	<b>Non - randomised control trial</b> 1.refugee children 2. non-refugee ethnic minority 3. indigenous white group	Initially – teacher consultation if no improvements then a specific intervention was selected from: family work (with/out child), individual therapy (psychodynamic, supportive), group work & in-home crisis intervention work	<b>Self-completion questionnaire –</b> Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire	Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) on child's psychosocial adjustment filled out by class teacher prior to service starting & 9 months later	SDQ scores: - baseline: significant overall differences between 3 groups – same pattern continued at end of study period - pre-vs post-treatment scores: total SDQ score in all groups decreased significantly - Refugee sub-group analysis (see study) - qualitative data: teacher & student comments p.303
<b>Bagley et al (2004)</b>	Multi-agency Sure Start team members	32	Sure Start – to recover the experiences and views of professionals concerned with delivery & implementation of a multi-agency programme tackling social exclusion of young children & their families  Location: England	<b>Exploration of relationships</b>  Paper highlights and considers themes & issues arising from data as they relate to initial stages of programme	<b>Views study</b>	Sure Start programme designed to: -Improve social & emotional development -Improve health -Improve the ability to learn -Strengthen families & communities	<b>Documentation analysis</b> <b>Observation</b> <b>Semi-structured interviews</b>	To identify factors important in implementation and delivery of multi-agency programme	Inter-disciplinary multi-agency team have managed to accommodate & overcome difficulties, highlighted by other researchers, to facilitate an integrated & holistic approach to the programme

Study	Participants	N	Context	Purpose	Study method	Intervention	Data collection	Outcome measure(s)	Results
<b>Barclay &amp; Kerr (2006)</b>	3 services in CAMHS in Edinburgh: Young People's Unit, Child & Family Mental Health Services and Psychological Service	Not stated	To explore how collaborative working across mental health & EP services is developing in Edinburgh  Location: Edinburgh, Scotland	<b>Exploration of relationships</b>  The study explored role perception, current levels of collaborative working, what does or does not lead to good collaborative working and how services might move forward in this respect.	<b>Views study</b> Exploration of how professionals understand & value each other's roles	Exploration of how collaborative working across mental health and psychological services is developing in Edinburgh.	<b>Self-completion questionnaire</b>  <b>Semi-structured interviews</b>	Self reports of extent of collaborative working currently taking place	Study indicated that the services need to develop communication and understanding – better knowledge of roles would help to be more effective  Supports findings of previous studies suggesting there are still individual & systemic barriers to collaborative working

#### **1.4.4 Outcomes / Themes**

It is difficult to provide a summary of outcomes for all studies as research questions and subsequent interventions are so divergent yet all consider multi-agency working with vulnerable children and their families in some way. As the nine studies selected for in-depth review apply a variety of data collection methods: qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods, data is not easily comparable. Synthesis revealed a large proportion of qualitative data so it was considered that the coding information generated in Table 3 was insufficient and it was necessary to identify additional 'themes' from data. A summary of the themes identified in the studies is shown in Table 5. Themes were identified by careful scrutiny of each study. Hymans (2006) identified seven over-arching themes which were commonly mentioned in studies included in the review and in the wider literature. Although Hymans' study was not included in the review, because it did not meet inclusion criteria, it was considered relevant to the review focus and so the seven over-arching themes identified in Hyman's study were used as the starting point in identifying themes. Hymans (2006) identified 'practice' as a theme yet this did not feature in the studies included for in-depth review. Therefore, six themes identified by Hymans (2006) and additional themes identified in other studies were added to give a total of 12 themes.

Below is an overview of the number of studies which included each theme; themes are listed in order of frequency from most frequently mentioned to least frequently mentioned:

- Leadership; Partnership & Resources
- People, Processes & Procedures; Roles, Identities, Status & Power;
- Customer/Service User Outcomes; Confidentiality & Information Sharing; Philosophical Positions
- Policy & Strategy; Inter-professional Issues; Communication
- Shared Objectives; Staff Retention & recruitment
- Practice

The number of themes generated in studies does not appear to be linked in any way to methodology: i.e. if a qualitative approach was used it did not always mean more themes were generated in the study. However, it is my opinion that

qualitative approaches provide a richer description of the concepts being investigated. Although quantitative data tends to be more easily compared, I think it fails to capture all elements which contribute to, in this case, multi-agency working. In contrast, qualitative approaches provide more opportunity to explore concepts further as they employ a more interactive approach to data collection methods. This interactive approach can provide richer data as a dialogue occurs between the participants and the researcher who jointly explore the concepts being researched.

All studies included for in-depth review identified factors which facilitate multi-agency working. This information is outlined in Table 5 which details the overarching themes these factors represent; Table 6 provides further information about what each theme means. In addition, some studies identified barriers to multi-agency working which in most cases are opposites of identified facilitators. However, there were some barriers identified which could not be identified as opposites of facilitators:

- Challenges to professional identity (Robinson & Cottrell, 2005)
- Tensions between professionals regarding service delivery in relation to statutory providers (Edgley & Avis, 2007)
- Clarity and understanding of shared terminology (Barclay & Kerr 2006)
- Effectiveness of intervention relating to timescales (Edgley & Avis, 2007)

All studies selected for in-depth review provide recommendations about how multi-agency working can be implemented most effectively, with four studies focusing on outcomes for professionals, two focusing on outcomes for children and their families, and the remaining two focusing on outcomes for professionals as well as children and their families. All studies provide data which reflect the findings of limited previous research in this area. Four studies go further to explore the psychological components of multi-agency working such as professional identity, status and power, and philosophical beliefs. Although a number of studies selected for in-depth review look at specific interventions for vulnerable children and families (CAPS, Manchester; Sure Start Local Programmes; Bridgeport Safe Start Initiative), the similarities in themes identified does suggest some transferability across projects.



	Barclay & Kerr (2006)	Bagley et al (2004)	Robinson & Cottrell (2005)	Edgley & Avis (2007)	Friedman et al (2007)	White & Verduyn (2006)	Fazel et al (2009)	Melhuish et al (2007)
<b>Leadership</b>	x	x	x		x	x		
<b>Policy &amp; Strategy</b>			x	x				x
<b>People, Processes &amp; Procedures</b>	x	x		x	x			x
<b>Partnership &amp; Resources</b>	x	x	x	x	x			x
<b>Customer/Service User Results</b>		x		x		x	x	
<b>Inter-professional issues</b>		x	x					x
<b>Confidentiality &amp; Information sharing</b>	x		x	x	x			
<b>Communication</b>	x		x		x			x
<b>Roles, identities, status and power</b>	x	x	x	x		x		x
<b>Philosophical positions</b>	x	x	x	x				x
<b>Shared objectives</b>	x					x		x
<b>Staff retention and recruitment</b>		x				x		x

Table 5: Themes identified

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Further Description</b>
<b>Leadership</b>	Management style Communication routes
<b>Policy &amp; Strategy</b>	Establishing a culture of 'commitment' at strategic and operational levels
<b>People, Processes &amp; Procedures</b>	Holding cross-agency meetings and training Positive team attitude Regular training
<b>Partnership &amp; Resources</b>	Co-located service providers Sharing funding Administrative procedures – shared databases managed collectively
<b>Customer/Service User Results</b>	Long-term interventions for most vulnerable families Consultation with service-users – parent voice Positive working relationships with community groups
<b>Inter-professional issues</b>	Relations with external agencies Re-engaging partners who have dropped out Mutual respect among professionals
<b>Confidentiality &amp; Information sharing</b>	Agreed pathways for information sharing The concept of collaboration of sharing
<b>Communication</b>	Poor communication – barrier Shared and joint work
<b>Roles, identities, status and power</b>	Clarity of roles Roles can become blurred as responsibilities change
<b>Philosophical positions</b>	Common team values / expectations Understanding of each others' theoretical stances Working within and understanding the 'vision'
<b>Shared objectives</b>	Competing models of service provision - unhelpful
<b>Staff retention and recruitment</b>	High staff turnover – inconsistencies in ways of working

**Table 6:** Themes and additional information contributing to each theme

## **1.5 Conclusions and recommendations**

### ***1.5.1 Conclusions of this review***

Qualitative and quantitative data gleaned from in-depth review of eight studies provides rich information on factors that need to be considered when a number of professionals are working together to deliver services or interventions to vulnerable children and their families. All studies identified factors which facilitate and promote multi-agency working as well as identifying areas that need careful consideration so they do not pose significant barriers to effective working. Methodologies applied varied significantly with some studies providing quantitative data and others providing either qualitative data or mixed-methods. Due to the diversity it can be difficult to make comparisons between studies yet the weight of evidence tool assists with this. All studies selected for in-depth review provided a medium or medium/high rating in overall weight of evidence. This suggests that data obtained from these studies can be considered appropriate in answering the question which is the focus for this review.

Only one study selected for in-depth review (Friedman, et al., 2007) was conducted over a longer period of time (3 years) with some follow-up evaluation of the intervention. One study (Fazel, Doll, & Stein, 2009) executed a follow-up evaluation of an intervention but this was on a short-term basis, after only nine months. The remaining seven studies were designed to provide a snapshot view of what was currently happening in existing multi-agency teams delivering services to children and their families. These data give valuable information about the development of multi-agency teams but it does not provide information on longer terms outcomes. Information is not provided about the length of time the multi-agency teams had been in existence, although a number of studies do detail factors affecting the initial establishment of the teams.

### ***1.5.2 Limitations of this review***

The principal limitation of this review is the diversity of studies included for in-depth review. Literature on the topic of multi-agency working with vulnerable

children and their families is scarce so locating easily comparable studies was difficult. The initial focus of the review was centred on locating quantitative data on the topic as this can be more readily compared. However, an exhaustive literature search uncovered few papers applying quantitative methods. Consequently, the scope was widened to include qualitative data which resulted in a wide variety of data collection methods sampled. However, the similarities in themes identified in the papers and the fact that these support findings from previous research suggests a level of agreement in the findings provided by various research methods.

### ***1.5.3 Recommendations for further research***

The majority of research in this area focuses on very young children (below three years of age) which probably reflects the government's agenda for early intervention. However, little is known about effective intervention for children beyond the age of three. At the age of five, in the UK, children transfer to the statutory education system. Research focused on intervention for primary-aged children would benefit practitioners working with this age range. It would be helpful for the focus of future research to consider a wider age range of children and young people.

Although tensions arising in multi-agency working are discussed in the literature, there are few studies which further explore these tensions to provide information on how these can be resolved or minimised. Previous research findings are useful in providing information for individuals who are in the initial stages of developing multi-agency teams. It would be beneficial for those managing established teams who want to maximise effectiveness of the teams to have information on how barriers and tensions have arisen and have then been resolved. This would provide valuable ways for teams to move forward.

In addition, the majority of studies are focused on professionals; the focus tends to be either on outcomes for professionals or on professionals' perspectives. This approach fails to consider multiple perspectives from those

involved in multi-agency processes, particularly service-user perspectives (children, young people and their families). It would be useful for future research to consider multiple perspectives from those involved in multi-agency processes to provide a rich overview of practice.

#### **1.5.4 Summary**

Although research exists about multi-agency working it tends to focus on professional perspectives about *what* works rather than on *how* and *whether* it works. In addition, focus on multi-agency teams delivering services to vulnerable children and families focuses, mainly, on services delivered to pre-school children. In summary, this review provides valuable information about factors which facilitate professionals in working together to deliver services to vulnerable children and their families. Areas of tension are also highlighted as these are equally important in the maintenance of an effective multi-agency team.

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## 1.6 Appendix A - Overview of professionals involved in studies included for in-depth review

### Bagley et al:

- Health visitors
- Midwives
- School nurses
- Nursery nurses
- Family support workers
- Special needs support workers
- Community development workers
- Outreach workers
- Administration staff
- Reader in Residence

### Edgley & Avis:

- 2 social workers
- 2 nursery nurses
- 1 Special educational needs coordinator
- 3 midwives
- 2 librarians
- 1 community paediatrician
- 1 clinical psychologist
- 3 health visitors
- 2 speech and language therapists
- 1 children's resource worker

### Robinson & Cottrell:

- Youth Crime Team
- Child Mental Health Team
- Special Needs Nursery
- Hospital-based Neurorehabilitation Team
- Child Development Team

### White & Verduyn:

- CAMHS – clinical psychology and nursing
- Educational psychology
- Manchester and Salford Family Service Unit (voluntary sector family support agency)

### Barclay & Kerr:

- Psychiatrists
- Community mental health workers
- Clinical psychologists
- Educational psychologists

Friedman et al:

- Early care and education providers
- Behavioural health/substance abuse service providers
- Legal/criminal justice service providers
- Family support service providers
- Hospitals and community health centres
- Child protective services
- Department of social services
- Domestic violence service provider

# Linking Document: The Research Journey

## **2.1 Defining a research focus**

The initial stage in this research journey involved conducting a systematic review to consider findings from the literature in relation to factors that facilitate professionals in working together to support vulnerable children and their families. Multi-agency working became an area of personal interest following my experience as a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP). I became increasingly involved in working together with other professionals to meet the needs of children, young people and their families. Working with professionals from different agencies required a new and different approach; I was interested in learning more about what is already known of facilitators to multi-agency working. I was also curious about what additional information might be useful when thinking about joined-up services implemented to address the needs of vulnerable children, young people and their families.

The review concluded that despite government drive for joined-up services to support families, particularly in the UK and USA, there has been a lack of research and information about how these joined-up services can be best implemented. In addition, the research that does exist has mainly focused on children in the early years (0-5) with some focus also on adolescents.

Therefore, the focus of my empirical research is on services delivered to primary school aged children (5-11) as a gap in information relating to this age group was identified in the systematic review. Previous research has also mainly focused on perspectives of professionals working within multi-agency teams. My research also considers the perspectives of parents and children, as well as school staff that are part of the process of this way of multi-agency working. When reading the literature I became aware of the application of activity theory principles as a tool for understanding the complex processes and systems which exist when people come together to work on a shared task (Leadbetter, 2008). In addition, activity theory provided a structure for data generation and analysis which differentiated it from other approaches to understanding systems. Alternative approaches are considered later in this paper.

## **2.2 Ontology – Epistemology – Methodology**

Ontology refers to what there is to know about the world and can be understood as related to questions about the nature of being and the form of reality (Guba & Lincoln, 1998); ontology considers the metaphysical truth about what you believe the world to be. This research is rooted in the relativist - materialist position which does not consider the world to be orderly and law-bound as realists assume it to be. The materialist ontological position acknowledges the influence of underlying structures, such as socio-economic relations, on events.

Epistemology refers to how we can know things about the world and relates to ontology. Each individual has their own 'worldview' and this view is used to develop hypotheses about everyday experiences (Stoker & Walker, 1996). The epistemology underpinning this research reflects contextual constructionist thinking. This paradigm is rooted in critical realism which provides the opportunity to seek to understand what is 'really' going on in the world yet acknowledges data collected by the researcher may not provide direct access to reality (Willig, 2008) as each individual's view of reality is likely to be different. Critical realism has much in common with constructionist approaches because the subjectivity in knowledge production is recognised. Contextual constructionist research assumes all knowledge is context and stand-point dependent. This acknowledges that individual perspectives generate multiple insights into the same phenomenon; contextual constructionist research would be expected to detail the relationship between perspectives and the contexts within which they were created. This epistemology reflects activity theory principles which focus on cultural, political, social and historical influences on the development of systems and working practice. Accounts must be grounded within the context they were produced both for participants and researchers. Therefore, reflexivity (discussed later, page 35) is an important element in this research process.

Methodology describes the general approach to studying research and refers to what you do and how you find out about areas. The ontological position and epistemological stance the researcher takes informs methodology.

Methodology subsequently informs the method i.e. the research technique as a set of steps guided by methodology. Qualitative methodological approaches were considered most appropriate to answer the research question because of the flexibility this enabled. Flexibility allows greater spontaneity in the interaction between participant and researcher (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005) by asking open-ended questions which often differ between participants dependent on given responses. This approach facilitates a reciprocal conversation where points can be explored as appropriate.

Qualitative data methods considered included: focus groups, observation and questionnaire. However, semi-structured interviews with pre-determined questions based on the seven points in the activity theory triangle were considered most appropriate because it is a commonly used method in flexible, qualitative designs (Robson, 2002). Interview is a flexible and adaptable way of obtaining information and has the potential to provide rich and highly illuminating material. It is acknowledged that interview is considered a lengthy data generation method; however, it appeared to be the most appropriate method because the purpose of the research was to generate rich data related to the perspectives of participants about which aspects of the Team Around the Primary School (TAPS - see page 51 for more description) process were supportive in improving outcomes for the children and families involved. Semi-structured interviews enabled themes to emerge from conversation and discussion rather than ideas being imposed on participants and provided a structure within the theoretical framework (Activity Theory) underpinning the research to be applied as a framework to guide data collection.

Despite the fact that interview as a method of data collection is criticised because of espoused theory (Leong & Austin, 2006) (i.e. there are differences in what people say they do and what they actually do), this was not considered a significant issue because this research study was not focused on what specific individuals were doing. Rather, the focus was on the process adopted by the TAPS team. Although it was inevitable that reference would

be made to what people had, and perhaps had not, done this was not the main focus of the research question. Interviews enabled further questioning when appropriate (see page 59 for more detail). It is acknowledged that researcher assumptions guide questions and interpretation and that knowledge of previous findings from the systematic review may impact on types of questions asked and importance of information heard. I endeavoured to be as non-leading as possible when asking questions, however, particularly when clarity was required, it is acknowledged participants may have been guided to some extent.

It was not considered appropriate to follow the same structure with child participants as they may not have been aware of all the elements discussed with parents and other participants. The discussions with the children focused on the following aspects:

- Why the TAPS worker was involved with the family / coming to the family home
- How the TAPS worker helped and supported the family
- What had been different in the family since the TAPS worker had been involved
- How things had changes since the TAPS worker had been involved
- Any areas that still needed to change

The focus was on positive outcomes as the children interviewed had experienced significant traumatic experiences (death of a sibling and witnessing attempted suicide of a parent) and I did not think it was appropriate to discuss these areas with the children as I was only meeting them once. Both children interviewed did refer to traumatic experiences in the interview; one child said there were things he did not want to talk about related to the TAPS involvement and I told him that was fine and the other child gave unclear details relating to her developmental understanding of events. Reference to these experiences was not ignored but was not given significance within the conversation as this was not the focus of the research. In addition, I did not consider it to be ethically appropriate for me to explore

these experiences as I was not working in a therapeutic capacity with these children; I was a researcher capturing their views at that time.

### **2.2.1 Qualitative approaches**

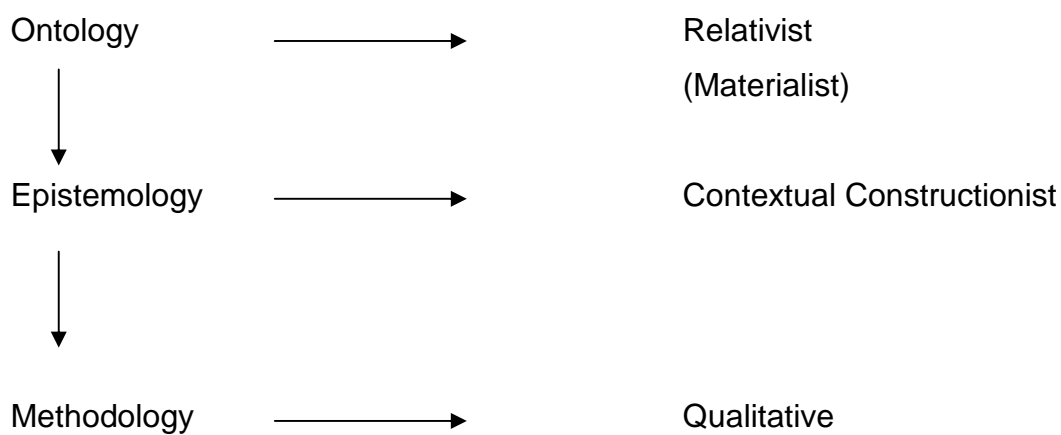
Advantages and disadvantages of alternative qualitative methods are considered in this section.

1. *Surveys and questionnaires* would have enabled more data to be gathered but the focus of this research was to obtain richer data from fewer participants. A questionnaire or survey, especially postal or self-administered, does not provide the opportunity for participant responses to be expanded on and in this sense is a reductionist approach. This does not fit with the epistemological underpinnings of this research (discussed previously).
2. *Focus Groups* were considered as an efficient way of generating substantial amounts of data (Robson, 2002). However, concerns remained about the management of focus groups to ensure the less articulate feel able to share their views and so individuals do not dominate (Robinson, 1999). Multiple participants were included from different professions / backgrounds and I did not want some voices / perceptions to be more dominant than others because of perceived levels of hierarchy. I felt this was more likely to happen if focus groups were conducted rather than semi-structured interviews. In addition, the amount of discussion generated depends largely on group dynamics and either promote or hinder discussion (Leong & Austin, 2006).
3. *Observation* was considered as a useful enquiring technique but was disregarded as asking a person directly is a more efficient way of getting answers to our research questions (Robson, 2002). In addition, issues surrounding the effect the researcher as an observer can have on the situation being observed were thought to outweigh the benefits of observation as a method. As with interview, observation is affected by significant levels of subjectivity whereby certain things, perhaps linked to prior knowledge from literature, may be noticed and given more importance over others. It is a time-consuming method of data collection



and given the time constraints of the project it might not have been possible to observe appropriate meetings within the required time frame.

Thematic analysis was chosen over other qualitative analysis approaches because, in contrast to IPA or grounded theory, thematic analysis is not attached to any pre-existing theoretical framework. As discussed in the research paper, a contextualist approach to thematic analysis was adopted which reflects the ontological and epistemological stances underpinning this research.



**Figure 1: Relationship between ontology, epistemology and methodology**

Figure 1 depicts the relationship between ontology, epistemology and methodology. The relationship is linear with ontology being the over-arching position which filters down to influence epistemology and methodology.

### **2.3 Reflexivity**

There are two types of reflexivity: personal and epistemological. Personal reflexivity involves reflecting upon the ways in which our own values, experiences, interests, beliefs, political commitments and social identities have shaped the research (Robson, 2002). In this, consideration is given to how the research process may have affected and changed the researcher. Epistemological reflexivity requires us to consider how the research question defined and limited findings. It encourages reflection on the assumptions underpinning the research which determined the way in which the research was carried out (Willig, 2008) as well as drawing attention to how the

researcher is implicated in the research and its findings. This research is approached with the assumption that there are elements of the TAPS process that are supportive to children and their families. Therefore, as a researcher, I asked participants questions that would generate this information.

Forward reflexivity refers to exploring the ethics of our intentions for research; ethical considerations should form an ongoing part of the research (Gillies & Alldred, 2002) and are explored further in the following section.

Once I had decided to apply activity theory principles as a tool to guide semi-structured interviews, I was concerned about whether or not the questions (relating to the points on the triangle) would facilitate and guide conversation. I was surprised, and pleased, to find the questions did not seem clumsy or awkward; rather they fitted naturally with the conversations I was having with participants.

Initially, the task of conducting the research felt daunting. However, once I reached the end of the research journey I realised I had the skills necessary to successfully complete the project. The first thing I learned about myself is that I was able to successfully apply negotiation skills during discussion with Local Authority representatives in the initial planning stages of the project. I was pleased that I conveyed my knowledge of applied psychology and 'real-world' research successfully to support the decisions I had made about how I would conduct the research and why. I also learned that I am able to synthesise large amounts of information by distilling salient points; this was particularly important in writing up the research given the small word limit.

The process of the research changed the way I think about the world. Whilst listening to the perspectives of the participants it really stood out to me that people experiencing the same thing do interpret it differently. Previously, I was aware that events and experiences could be interpreted by people differently but I had not realised the degree to which this happens. This has made me think carefully about my work as an EP and I will continue to be

mindful of the different interpretations people have of events and experiences and how this might effect subsequent actions and outcomes.

## **2.4 Ethical Considerations**

As well as ensuring planned methods were approved by Newcastle University's ethics board, there are a number of other issues to consider in relation to ethics. One important aspect to acknowledge is the way in which the researcher and any 'gate-keepers' (Miller, 1998) influence who eventually becomes research participants. All families involved in the research reported positives about the TAPS workers and might have felt a sense of duty to participate as an acknowledgement of the work that had been carried out to improve outcomes / change things for them and their families. Also, as detailed in the research write-up participants were selected by the TAPS Manager; the manager might have been influenced, in an indeterminable way, to choose participants whom she thought might illuminate issues (positive or negative) pertinent to her and her team. This aspect reflects the balance between Local Authority and University requirements in designing this research project.

Issues around 'informed consent' are acknowledged in recognition that it is not always easy to determine research outcomes at the outset of a project (Miller & Bell, 2002). The consent form identified the purpose of the study as: '...to explore the TAPS process and identify elements of it which best support you and your family'. As outcomes of the research were largely participant dependent it was difficult to give any more clarity at the outset of the project. Parents gave written consent for themselves and for their children to be involved in the project; children also gave their own written consent on their initial meeting with me as researcher.

When I decided to include children in the research I thought it was important to gain their consent to be involved. I was aware of the children's developmental stages and when I met with them to describe the research and their involvement in it; I took this into consideration by, for example, modifying the language used. I was aware that the age of the children might have

impacted on the level of 'informed consent'. Consequently, I asked the parents and carers of the children, as their legal guardians, to give their consent for the children to be included in the research.

I was aware that procedures needed to be implemented to ensure the safeguarding of participants. The children included in the research were interviewed in their school; there was a member of school staff, who had a good relationship with the child, available should the child have become upset or distressed about anything that was discussed during the interview. Parents and carers who were interviewed were encouraged to contact the TAPS worker following the interview if they felt the interview had opened up some emotions which they felt they needed further support with.

Participants were informed that anonymous audiotapes of the interviews would be stored in a locked drawer which only the researcher had access to for the period within which the research took place; following this, audiotapes would be destroyed. Anonymous written transcriptions will be kept by the researcher, for a period of ten years, in a locked drawer which only the researcher has access to.

## **2.5 Political context**

The period within which the research and write up in this document has been conducted (July 2009-April 2011) has seen the UK have two different governments with different ideologies. The early stages of the document (i.e. the systematic review and early empirical research planning) were conducted under a political agenda created by the previous Labour Government. This previous Government conceived joined-up services and pushed for agencies and professionals to work together to improve outcomes for children and their families, particularly the most vulnerable and those at risk of social exclusion. Despite a lack of research into whether or not joined-up services are better able to meet the needs of children and their families (Watson, 2006) the Labour Government's legislation (e.g. DfES, 2003) demanded services join together to support children and their families.

May 2010 saw huge changes to the UK government with the election of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition. As identified in the research report, the influence of political context cannot be underestimated. The period since election of the coalition has been an unsettled time, particularly for those working in Local Authority controlled services delivered to children and their families.

## **2.6 Why did I use activity theory?**

Educational Psychologists (EPs) working within and with complex human systems can apply activity theory principles as a way of understanding human activity within a sociocultural context (Leadbetter, 2005). The conceptual framework offered by activity theory provided a research design capable of dealing with complexity and diversity whilst ensuring feedback and learning (Edwards & Fox, 2005).

Leadbetter (2005) highlights the importance of applied psychologists being well grounded in terms of the research they draw upon as well as the theory that informs their practice and concludes that sociocultural and activity-theoretical approaches have much to offer:

- they are based on sound and important psychological principles and theory;
- they take due account of the individual within any simple or complex system;
- the role of mediation within learning and other activities is viewed as central and, therefore, through developing and using theoretical and conceptual tools surrounding mediation, our understanding and applications can be enhanced;
- they provide a framework for understanding the sociocultural aspects of organisations and systems without downplaying the importance of the individual within any system;
- they emphasise the importance of the historical context in understanding why individuals and systems function as they do.

Leadbetter (2005 Page 27).

## 2.7 Different applications of activity theory

This section considers two applications of activity theory principles in previous research.

### 1. Learning in and for Interagency Working (LIW) Project:

This research was focused on professional learning in 'multi-agency' children's services settings (Warmington & Leadbetter, 2010). In the LIW Project research interventions were conducted in UK Children's Services workplace settings where professionals were engaged in 'joined up', multi-agency practices which were aimed at developing greater responsiveness, flexibility and holism in meeting the needs of children and families. The political climate in which this project was developed was focused on the *Every Child Matters* Green Paper (DfES, 2003) and the Children Act (2004). These policies sought to address the needs of young people and their families identified as being at risk of social exclusion; they called for qualitatively different ways of joined up multi-agency working to operate across traditional service and team boundaries (Middleton, 2010; Warmington & Leadbetter, 2010).

Local authorities included in the LIW Project were addressing the recommendations set out in new policy by the creation of multi-professional teams, extended schools, and common assessment frameworks. The focus of the LIW Project was centred on the labour-power aspect of Activity Theory. This aspect is rooted in Marxist thinking which considers labour-power as a constellation of skills, knowledge and dispositions that constitutes the capacity of individuals and collectives for productive labouring action (Daniels & Warmington, 2007). This application of activity theory principles reflects 'expansion' of learning in practice that (Engestrom, 1999) promotes.

### 2. Developmental Work Research (DWR):

This approach is derived from cultural historical activity theory (CHAT). In this project, professionals were asked to explore and identify the challenges they faced in learning to work in a multi-agency way using analytic resources of CHAT. This is an interventionist approach, over time (Edwards & Fox, 2005), which enables activity theory to become part of a structured and coherent developmental process as well as a tool for analysis (Leadbetter, 2005). This

process involves a cycle of ethnographic investigation and organised feedback through a series of what Engestrom terms 'change laboratories'. The labs or workshops are set up to explore data gathered which reflects various elements of the activity theory framework; focus is placed on contradictions which exist between elements of the framework (e.g. tools / strategies in place). The labs provide a learning forum where past, present and future systems can be analysed and contradictions within these explored and rectified.

Owing to time scales in this project, activity theory principles are applied to provide a 'snap-shot' of what is currently happening in the multi-agency TAPS process. Future study could employ DWR or LIW approaches so that learning and development opportunities are provided for those working within the TAPS process.

### **2.8 Which other models / frameworks could I have used?**

The research focus was on the process or 'system' of a multi-agency team delivering services to vulnerable children and their families. A system is an entity made up of a set of interacting parts which mutually communicate with and influence each other (Bateson, 1972) to achieve a core goal. Systems can include a family, a neighbourhood, an organisation (such as a school) or a network of organisations. Systems thinking approaches such as Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) consider the impact of environment on individuals. The *macrosystem* recognises the individual in the cultural, political, social and economic climate. However, unlike activity theory, I felt this approach did not provide a framework upon which to base data collection and analysis. In this research, Activity Theory principles guided both data collection and data analysis; other approaches to systems thinking would not have enabled this.

There has been a four phase development in systems thinking in the world of educational psychology (Fox, 2009):

1. The 1950s and 1960s represent a change from pathologising the child, to recognising the child as part of the family system.
2. In the 1970s and 1980s, educational psychologists (EPs) focused on developing practice to work with schools on organisational change, with systemic change shifting the focus to how systems create meaning. This aspect mirrors activity theory principles which consider the impact of systems on knowledge, learning, development and ultimately meaning for those working within the systems.
3. The late twentieth century saw the development of the dominant discourse in systemic thinking.
4. Most recently, the fourth phase has been focused on thinking systemically about changes in professional practice in relation to Children Services.

Humanistic Marxism, which underpins activity theory principles, highlights the importance of links between individuals and their macro socio-historical context. However, other approaches to systems work are largely approached from a deterministic, mechanistic perspective (Fox, 2009). Viewing systems in this way is reductionist as it views the person carrying out the work (the EP) as the expert who is able to 'fix' the system by creating solutions. Recognising the broad social, cultural and historical influence on systems throws consideration and investigation wider and upholds the contextual constructionist view of the world. A reductionist deterministic approach better reflects a positivist view of the world which, in my view, fails to acknowledge the wider social influence on everyday interaction.

A contextual constructionist approach recognises that individuals as part of a system co-construct perspectives dependent on the experiences they have. Systemic thinking asserts that it is unhelpful and artificial to adopt reductionist approaches because there are unavoidable, complex and reciprocal interactions between systems and subsystems relating to individuals, groups and organisations (Gameson & Rhydderch, 2008).



## **2.9 Summary**

My empirical research study focused on the process of multi-agency working rather than its outcomes. Therefore, this study focuses on *why and how* this way of working is perceived to work, rather than on *whether* it works. The decision to focus on process was taken because to evaluate outcomes within the timescale would have been difficult. In addition, identifying outcomes to measure would have been broad-reaching given the nature of TAPS.

Literature (Watson, 2006) suggests evaluating the outcomes of multi-agency working is difficult and this is reflected in the lack of outcome research in literature.

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**Which elements in the Team  
Around the Primary School  
process are perceived as  
supportive for vulnerable  
children and their families?**

### **3.1 Abstract**

Multi-agency working has become increasingly common in the last decade; government legislation, implemented by the previous Labour government, (e.g. *Every Child Matters*, 2003) supported and propelled the notion of joined-up working. Despite the push for joined-up working, little is known about the benefits of this way of working for children and their families, particularly those who are most vulnerable. This study investigates effective working practice within an established multi-agency team delivering services to vulnerable primary school-aged children and their families. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather the perceptions of professionals working in the multi-agency team, school staff and the families being supported by the team. Activity theory principles are applied as a framework to guide data generation and analysis. The focus of the study is on facilitative elements of the multi-agency process; six broad supportive themes were identified along with five broad constraining themes. Findings support previous research in this area and provide valuable information to consider how multi-agency teams delivered to vulnerable children and their families can be developed.

### **3.2 Introduction**

#### **3.2.1 Multi-agency working**

In the last decade there has been a wealth of UK governmental documentation (e.g. Department of Health 1997; Cabinet Office 1998; Children Act, 2004) and policy reforms supporting the notion of agencies working together to support vulnerable children (Barnes, 2008). Implementation of the Green Paper *Every Child Matters (ECM)*, (Department for Education and Skills, 2003) agenda cemented the previous Labour government's focus on joined-up working and was the catalyst for monumental change in the way services provided to children and their families were delivered. Marks (2006) asserts: "teams represent the critical unit that 'gets things done in today's world'" (page i). The focus on a joined-up approach requires new ways of working (Leadbetter, 2006b) to deliver improved services for children, young people and their families.

Joined-up working is considered better able to deal with the complexities that families present and much more likely to achieve positive outcomes by delivering services that are less fragmented (Milbourne, Macrae, & Maguire, 2003). Despite this government assertion little has been done in researching which, if any, specific features of joined-up working generate improved outcomes for those families identified as vulnerable (Barnes, 2008; Leadbetter et al., 2007). It is not yet clear whether new practices are being developed or whether the same practices are simply being rearranged. Sloper (2004) concludes there is little evidence for the effectiveness of multi-agency working and suggests a lack of research in identifying the link between facilitators to multi-agency working and the impact of this on outcomes.

Despite the lack of evidence to support the effectiveness of multi-agency working, funding agencies have concluded that solving complex problems often requires involvement of multidisciplinary teams (Paletz & Schunn, 2010). The introduction of Common Assessment Framework (CAF) as part of the Every Child Matters agenda (DfES, 2003) provided a policy driver for joint working. CAF is a shared assessment and planning framework used across children's services and local areas in England which focuses on developing a coordinated service provision to promote early identification of the additional needs of children and young people. Central to the CAF process is the implementation of the Team Around the Child (TAC) Model. TAC is deemed to support particular elements of good professional practice in joined-up working, information sharing and early intervention (CWDC, 2009).

In 2008-9, the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) commissioned research into the TAC model of multi-agency working with the 11-14 age groups. Findings identified the following positives in the TAC process:

- Child-focused
- Flexible
- Improved accountability and transparency among agencies
- More timely and consistent support

- Minimises duplication
- Facilitates information and knowledge sharing
- Improved knowledge of other services
- Highlights gaps in services
- Better family understanding of support, objectives and outcomes of support

Conversely, difficulty engaging particular services and occupational groups with the TAC model was a barrier. Although services difficult to engage varied from area to area those mentioned consistently were general practitioners (GPs), child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), adult services and some secondary schools.

Different models of multi-agency working are referred to in literature (Atkinson, Doherty, & Kinder, 2005) and are best described as: 'Formation of a new team', 'formation of a virtual organisation', 'co-locating staff from partner organisations', 'steering groups'. The focus of this study is the formation of a new multi-agency team with staff being seconded from their agencies for the period of time for which funding is secured.

Relevant literature includes numerous descriptors to refer to people coming together from different agencies and professions to work on a joint task: 'multi-agency', 'joint working', 'multidisciplinary', 'interdisciplinary', 'team working', 'partnership' and 'collaboration'. Terms are used inconsistently and interchangeably and it is unclear whether a shared understanding of multi-agency working exists across different agencies (Hughes, 2006). For the purpose of this paper, the terms 'multi-agency' and 'joined-up' working are used to describe professionals coming together from more than one agency to work on a shared task.

The ECM agenda and Children Act; 2004 stress the need for new, qualitatively different forms of multi-agency practice, in which providers operate across traditional service and team boundaries. Watson (2006)



conducted a broad literature review across 38 papers to identify factors previously cited as facilitating multi-agency working; an overview of key themes identified is provided in Table 6. In support of Farrell et al's (2006) study on multi-agency working, Watson's review concluded applied psychologists, including educational psychologists (EPs) are well-placed to facilitate aspects of multi-agency working; this is expanded later in this paper.

1.	A shared vision, with clear and realistic aims and objectives
2.	A clear and shared understanding of the roles and responsibilities of members of the team
3.	A past history of joint working between the agencies
4.	Team members open to 'horizontal learning' (across professional roles, in addition to 'within discipline')
5.	Adequate resources in terms of funding and staff
6.	An approach to organisational development that works in partnership
7.	Having 'like-minded' individuals in the team
8.	Procedures for monitoring achievements in relation to the aims and objectives, and providing feedback and review
9.	Strong leadership – with clear drive and vision to 'get things done'
10.	Mutual respect and reciprocity, with all members playing a role in team development
11.	Team communication skills such as listening, negotiating and compromising
12.	A 'common language', including terms and definitions in order to conduct discussions
13.	Mutual respect for professional roles, and trust between members of the team
14.	Effective systems and procedures for communication and information-sharing between all relevant people
15.	Knowledge of other agencies; overcoming professional stereotypes
16.	Frontline staff who are committed to, and keen to be involved in, multi-agency working
17.	Joint training
18.	A recognition of separateness between team members to retain professional identity
19.	Strong, robust and coherent management arrangements (e.g. multi-agency steering group)
20.	Flexible and innovative funding mechanisms (e.g. pooled budgets, joint funding, use of alternative sources of funding)

**Table 7: Themes identified in Watson's (2006) literature review on multi-agency working**

### ***3.2.2 Team Around the Primary School***

The specific focus of this study is joined-up working in a Local Authority (LA) based early intervention team supporting vulnerable children and their families: Team Around the Primary School (TAPS). The LA formed TAPS in

January 2009 when government funding to expand the remit of the LA's Anti-Social Behaviour Family Intervention Project (ASB FIP), to tackle child poverty and youth crime. The TAPS team comprises 14 workers from various disciplines including: three qualified social workers, and workers seconded from agencies related to youth offending, domestic violence, emotional wellbeing, housing and neighbourhood support services. TAPS provides a range of services to children who attend the 30 primary schools in the LA. Referrals are mainly received directly from schools who request support to address concerns across issues including behaviour, emotional wellbeing, parenting, housing and social matters. Varied levels of support are offered to families depending on need ranging from low-level infrequent support to intensive regular support which reflects the incorporation of the Family Intervention Project (FIP) duties into TAPS. FIP provides high-level intensive support to those families identified as most 'at-risk' to facilitate positive change. FIP targets families who engage in a disproportionate amount of anti-social behaviour, are living in poverty or those who are at risk of becoming involved in offending behaviours.

Aims of the TAPS initiative reflect guidance from the Social Exclusion Unit (2001) which state multi-faceted issues connected to poverty and social exclusion (i.e. unemployment, poor skills, high crime, poor housing, family break-down, teenage pregnancy, child poverty and school exclusion) require joined-up solutions. TAPS apply the TAC model to coordinate service delivery. A CAF is completed, when a family is referred to TAPS, which then initiates the TAC process. Consistent with the TAC model a Lead Professional is identified which is usually the TAPS worker. A TAC meeting is held every six weeks and it is the Lead Professional's responsibility to coordinate meeting arrangements which includes arranging a venue, inviting relevant people and recording and disseminating information.

Although terminology used to describe people coming together to work on a shared activity is used interchangeably, I understand the TAPS team to be a multi-disciplinary team because the workers are seconded from different agencies where they each have different roles. However, the nature of their

work is *multi-agency* because they coordinate the support provided to vulnerable children and their families from multiple agencies including, for example, Child and Adolescent Mental Health, domestic violence support services and counselling services.

### **3.2.3 Activity Theory**

Studies (Daniels et al., 2007; Leadbetter, 2006a, 2006b) have investigated the application of activity theory principles to multi-agency working. Activity theory draws upon a range of disciplines including psychology, sociology, political theory and communication studies; its use within educational psychology practice is new and innovative (Leadbetter, 2008). Activity theory has developed over the past 70 years from the original ideas of Vygotsky and other Soviet psychologists. Vygotsky explored the links between individual processes of learning and development and the impact cultural and social contexts have on these (Leadbetter, 2008). Vygotsky stressed the importance of mediation in the process of learning and development and emphasised that human interactions are always mediated in some way. This is in contrast to a simple behavioural model:



which suggests that activities can be analysed simply by an action being taken on an object and an outcome being the result of this.

Paletz and Schunn (2010) summarise conceptual models of teamwork to show some combination of four mediating concepts:

- the broader environmental and organisational context
- the team task demands
- team processes
- team outputs, generally in the input-process-output type of model (e.g. Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006).

The input-process-output model is akin to the simple behavioural model described above. Developments in simple models (e.g. Saunders and Ahuja,

2006) recognise the reciprocal two-way influence of structure with processes and outcomes but, unlike activity theory, the political, historical and social contexts within which the work is being organised and delivered is not considered. Political influence on service delivery cannot be underestimated, as current changes in UK government policy highlight. The influence of social contexts (organisations, nations and cultures) is recognised in Paletz and Schunn's (2010) framework but is not explored in great detail as it is beyond the scope of the article.

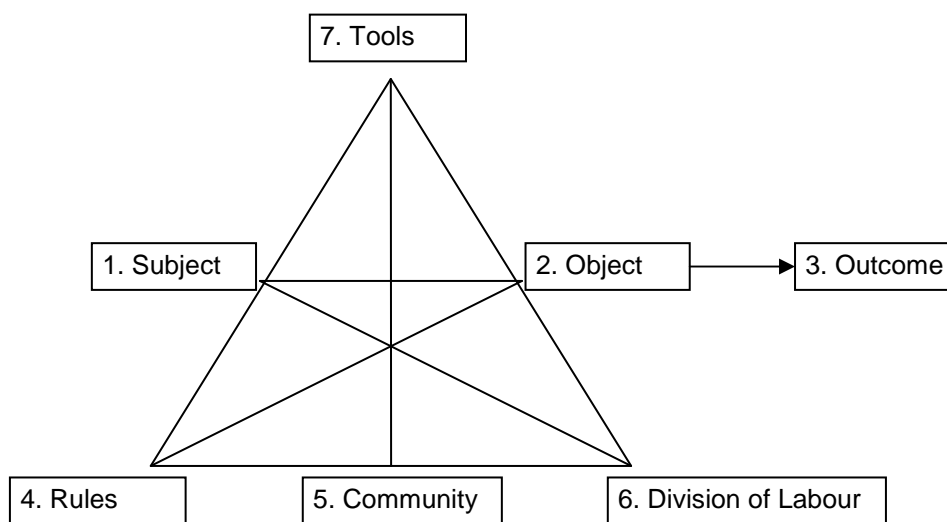
Vygotsky's original ideas were developed further by Engestrom (1999) to enable activity systems to be examined at the macro-level of the collective and the community. Previous thinking was focused instead at the micro-level with concentration on the individual operating with tools. Engestrom's developments created the second generation activity theory model. The second generation activity theory model is applied in this research as a tool to capture the perspectives of those involved in the TAPS process.

Engestrom developed the second generation activity theory model further by considering the impact of multiple systems coming together and interacting. This third generation activity theory model focuses on tensions and contradictions that occur when a number of systems interact. These tensions and contradictions create conflict which must be resolved if the systems are to work successfully. Once resolved, a new system is created. This research applied the second generation activity theory model because when the research was conducted the TAPS team was an established system which had been operating for more than a year. Consequently, I think the conflicts may have occurred earlier when the team was in its early days of formation and, therefore, to apply the third generation activity theory model with an established team would be inappropriate.

Success is not automatically achieved by having the right people in a team (Marks, 2006). Applying activity theory to multi-agency working allows a comparison between professionals' understanding of multi-agency working, how these differ from current working practices ('activity systems') and how

they lead to the development of innovative multi-agency working (Daniels, et al., 2007). In doing this, activity theory principles address the challenges of multi-agency professional learning by:

- Encouraging the recognition of areas in which there is a need for change in working practices;
- Suggesting possibilities for change through *re-conceptualising* the 'objects' that professionals are working on, the 'tools' that professionals use in their multi-agency work and the 'rules' in which professional practices are embedded.



**Figure 2:** Interactions between elements identified in activity theory.

Activity theory is appropriate for examining multi-agency working as working with other professionals involves engaging with many configurations of diverse social practices (Daniels et al, 2007); activity theory considers social elements connected with professional practice. Consistent with previous research (DfES, 2004), activity theory principles are applied as an organising framework to capture elements of the role the TAPS process considered valuable in supporting vulnerable children and their families. In addition, activity theory principles are used as a framework to guide participant interviews and as a tool to examine and analyse data. Activity theory is a useful tool for analysing and understanding complex work-based practices as individual actions are considered in relation to the wider social, cultural and

historical contexts (Leadbetter et al., 2007) and particularly in LA-based services the influence of these cannot be ignored.

By examining the TAPS process through the activity theory lens, it is hoped that a clear understanding of the processes supporting outcomes, and how these tasks are executed, can be gained. Therefore, the research question is 'Which elements in the Team Around the Primary School process are perceived as supportive for vulnerable children and their families?' Activity theory provides a framework to anchor discussion and analysis to provide coherence but also to allow a degree of flexibility in individual differences. Within this, differences and contradictions are likely to be highlighted; these are not seen as weaknesses but rather as learning points so that developments can be made.

#### ***3.2.4 Research Underpinnings***

The research aims to address a number of key areas:

- What are the specific facilitative elements in the TAPS process?
- What are the multiple perspectives and how do activity systems complement each other?
- How does this way of working link with previous findings?

The conceptual framework underpinning this research is aligned with the current social and political context i.e. the previous government's rhetoric on the development of multi-agency practice to support children and families, particularly the most vulnerable. A new political context is emerging following the formation of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition in May 2010. However, policy change has not yet been confirmed and there is an element of uncertainty about whether the new government will continue the previous Labour government focus on joined-up working. However, the recent Green Paper on Special Educational Needs (DfE, 2011), provides an indication that the importance of this way of working will continue to be recognised.

This research is rooted in a contextual constructionist perspective which acknowledges ways in which broader social context influences meanings while retaining a focus on the material and other limits of 'reality'. Therefore, the researcher believes all knowledge is contextual and dependent on standpoint. The idea that different perspectives generate different insights into the same phenomenon is incorporated into data generation methods. The contextual constructionist perspective is characterised by theories such as critical realism. This paper intends to reflect reality through the perspectives of participants rather than going further to unpick reality.

### **3.2.5 Rationale for Research**

This study aims to examine the multiple perspectives of individuals involved in the TAPS process by applying activity theory principles to guide data generation and anchor data analyses. Consistent with previous studies in this area e.g. (Leadbetter, 2006a) activity theory principles are applied as a tool to conceptualise the systems that exist when people work together on specific activities. The application of activity theory principles is increasingly popular within the field of educational psychology (see Educational and Child Psychology, 22(1), 2005) to understand social and professional practice in relation to organisational change.

Working at an individual level may miss structural and organisational factors contributing to families' difficulties (Milbourne, 2005). By applying activity theory principles this study aims to obtain better understanding of the systems existing alongside families. This, in turn, may provide evidence about where these systems are incongruent. These contradictions highlight areas where systems should be united to better support families. Previous study in this area has focused on professionals' perspectives (Sloper, 2004); this study also includes perspectives of the family (parents/carers and children) so that the views of everyone involved in the activity systems are considered.

## **3.3 Method**

### **3.3.1 Procedure**

This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews to generate data with adult participants: parents, school staff and TAPS workers and was guided by

questions linked to activity theory principles. Children were interviewed but less structure was applied as these participants were under eight years of age and so understanding of some questions may have been limited. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was performed on qualitative information to identify themes relating to the seven points on the activity theory triangle (see further explanation below).

### **3.3.2 Participants**

Six families were initially identified to participate in the research. The families were chosen by the TAPS Manager according to the following criteria:

- *Allocated TAPS workers:* to provide a broad range of perspectives, families were identified who had six different TAPS workers.
- *Level of support from TAPS:* to provide a broad overview of the type of work carried out by TAPS, families accessing different levels of support were identified for inclusion in the research.
- *Location:* families with children attending six different primary schools were identified for inclusion. This was included in the criteria so perspectives of a range of school staff could be gained.

Families selected for inclusion had at least one child of primary school age (5-11 years). TAPS workers made initial contact with identified families to determine interest. An overview of the project was provided for TAPS workers to share with families (Appendix B). A joint home visit was then arranged with the TAPS worker and researcher to provide more information and to gain consent. Contact with the identified families began in July 2010; consent from three of the families was gained quickly. Repeated attempts to meet and gain consent from one family were unsuccessful and this family was no longer included in the research. An alternative family was identified. Another family was excluded from the research because the researcher became involved with that family in her role as Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP). A replacement family was not identified as it was thought enough data would be generated without this. By early September 2010 consent had not been gained from two families due to TAPS workers failing to reply to telephone calls and emails from the researcher. After consultation with the TAPS



Manager it was agreed that timescales did not allow for continued pursuit of consent from these families so three of the original six families identified were included in the research. A total of 12 participants were interviewed: three mothers, three TAPS workers (two qualified social workers), four members of school staff (three teachers, one parent support advisor) and two children (aged between 5-8). Two children from one family were excluded because they moved from the area before interviews were conducted. Information about the families and the people working with them is included in Table 8. All names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

	<b>Family One</b>	<b>Family Two</b>	<b>Family Three</b>
<b>Parent/s / Carer (P/C)</b>	Sally & Darren	Karen	Sarah
<b>Child (Ch)</b>	James	Lucy & Nicola	Sophie
<b>TAPS Worker (TW)</b>	Helen	Julie	Lisa
<b>School Staff (SS)</b>	Linda	Rebecca & Natalie	Gill

**Table 8: Overview of families and the people supporting them**

### **3.3.3 Semi-structured interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants. Consistent with application of activity theory principles (Leadbetter, et al., 2007), data were collected from participants using an activity theory framework to structure questions asked during interviews. Therefore, interviews with adult participants were guided by the seven questions (see Table 9) chosen to reflect the seven points which formulate the activity theory triangle (Figure 2).

1.	Who are we all?
2.	What are we working on?
3.	To achieve what?
4.	What supports/constrains this work?
5.	Who else is/could be involved? When?
6.	How is the work shared? Who does what?
7.	What is being used? How shall we do/achieve this?

**Table 9: Questions to guide semi-structured interviews**

The format of the interviews was not rigid; the researcher followed the conversation of the participants but held interview questions in mind to guide

the discussion. The questions were phrased in this way so as to be accessible to all participants and free from esoteric jargon. Each child participant was asked why they thought the TAPS worker was involved with their family and how they perceived things to have changed in their home since involvement from TAPS. Throughout discussion, the children were engaged in a drawing activity in the hope of creating a relaxed atmosphere conducive to open discussion.

#### **3.3.4 Analysis**

As a specific research question was identified from the outset, theoretical thematic analysis was carried out following guidelines from Braun & Clarke (2006). Therefore, coding systems were driven by the research question and application of activity theory principles as a framework for data analysis. In this approach, a more detailed analysis of specific aspects of the data emerges. The focus here is on information which reflects the seven points on the activity theory triangle: subject, object, outcome, rules, community, division of labour and tools. My thematic analysis applied a semantic approach whereby themes are identified within the explicit or surface meanings of the data. This approach is consistent with a contextualist method which is characterised by theories such as critical realism. This method acknowledges the ways in which the broader social context influences meanings while retaining a focus on the material and other limits of 'reality'. By including multiple participants, it is hoped a richer picture can be generated by considering different perspectives and insights.

#### **3.3.5 Ethics**

Ethical approval was sought from Newcastle University. All participants were given a written statement of the project aims. They were informed that they had the option to withdraw at any time and that their views might be quoted anonymously in publications. Interviews were recorded with participants' agreement and transcribed for analysis. Written consent was gained from all participants. (See linking document for more information –page 37).

### **3.4 Findings**

Data from question one: 'Who are we all?' is not included as this is self-explanatory. Data analysis revealed information relating to point three in the triangle 'To what end / To achieve what?' was limited. Therefore, this is not included in this section; reasons for this limited data are explored in the discussion. Analysis highlighted that the richest data related to point four on the activity theory triangle: 'rules'. These data were largely linked to the question: 'What supports or constrains this work?' Themes have been generated from these questions as it is this area which is most relevant to the research question. Data relating to five points of the activity theory triangle are explored in more detail in the following section.

#### **3.4.1 Question 2: What are we working on?**

Although articulated differently by participants, all were in agreement about the purpose of the TAPS involvement. For example, Sally (P/C - see Table 8) identified 'James's behaviour' and 'Jessica's behaviour' as areas where the work was focused as well as on her relationship with her husband. The school staff member who was involved in this process with the family referred to this same area of focus as 'family dynamics / relationships.'

#### **3.4.2 Question 4: What supports/constrains this work?**

*This section focuses on supportive aspects*

Information relating to this question fits into six broad themes. An overview of the six over-arching themes and the sub-themes within is provided in Table 10:

Theme	Additional information to support theme descriptors
<b>1. Relationships</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parent-TAPS worker</li> <li>• Child-TAPS worker</li> <li>• Home-school</li> <li>• Other agencies-TAPS worker</li> <li>• School-TAPS worker</li> <li>• PSA as link between home-school-TAPS</li> </ul>
<b>2. Engagement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Home-school</li> <li>• Family-TAPS worker</li> <li>• Family engagement with support</li> </ul>
<b>3. Support</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TAPS worker's understanding of family dynamics</li> <li>• Support from TAPS worker in the home</li> <li>• Designated Dad's worker</li> <li>• Advocate for the family</li> <li>• Intensity of support</li> <li>• Advice and strategies</li> <li>• Availability of TAPS worker</li> <li>• Able to address issues schools can't</li> <li>• Access to a variety of support systems/agencies</li> <li>• Child voice</li> <li>• Long term support</li> <li>• Flexible working</li> </ul>
<b>4. Roles</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TAPS worker as Lead Professional</li> <li>• Clear understanding of roles and responsibilities</li> <li>• TAPS workers not Social Care</li> <li>• Sharing responsibility</li> <li>• Advocate for the school</li> </ul>
<b>5. Meetings</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regular reviews</li> <li>• Attendance from relevant agencies (report if not)</li> <li>• Action plan and target setting</li> <li>• Parent voice</li> <li>• Information sharing</li> <li>• Family needs</li> <li>• Referrals</li> </ul>
<b>6. Professional Development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supervision</li> <li>• Understanding of agencies / services</li> <li>• Building relationships</li> </ul>

**Table 10: Six over-arching themes identified as supports to TAPS process**

Each broad theme is explored in more detail below and some themes have subsequent sub-themes. Direct quotes are used to provide further understanding of the information which generated each theme.

### **3.4.3 Question 4 Theme 1: Relationships**

'Relationships' was mentioned by every participant and refers to the following relationships:

- Parent –TAPS worker
- Child-TAPS worker (mentioned when individual child work was carried out by the TAPS worker)
- Home - school
- Other agencies - TAPS worker
- School – TAPS worker
- Parent support advisor (PSA) as link between home-school-TAPS

Gill (SS) said she knew there had been a change in her relationship with Sarah (P/C) because Sarah began to use her first name when Gill (SS) spoke with her. Linda (SS) talked about an improvement in the relationship between mother and school:

*"...before she [mother] would come in if she needed to talk to me, getting at the end of her tether but she's coming in for parents evenings, she's... talking to the class teacher more."*

The fact that 'relationships' were mentioned by all participants indicates the significance given to this concept. Perhaps the nature of the difficulties the TAPS team are supporting families with increases the importance placed on building good relationships. In order for the TAPS workers to make suggestions about how families need to change the way they do things it is crucial that they build the relationship first. Families are more likely to act on suggestions from those they trust and those with whom they have built relationships.

### **3.4.4 Question 4 Theme 2: Engagement**

'Engagement' was mentioned by all professionals' interviewed but was not referred to in transcriptions from parents or family members. School staff identified an improvement in the contact they had with parents once TAPS was involved with the family:

- Sally and Darren (P/C) were much more willing to come into school and began to attend events such as parents' evening:

*“She’s (P/C) coming in for parents evenings, she’s (P/C) talking to the class teacher more.”*

- Sarah (P/C) was more willing to contact school if she was running late or if she was struggling to bring her children to school:

*“A few times she (P/C) phoned me saying she was going to be late.”*

- TAPS workers referred to their own engagement with the family in terms of being approachable, available and aware of their needs:

*“I suppose it has to be the worker’s engagement skills really. Erm, and being truthful and honest and like I did have to go in and say and I did feel uncomfortable that really I think I think they needed some help in their relationship before they could move on and I suppose being upfront and honest with them about what needed to happen and that things couldn’t change with Ben until the two were working more on a level pegging I think.” (Helen – TW)*

Professionals also referred to how the family engaged with the support that was offered to them; there was a general feeling from data analysis that families gave the impression they were open to any support on offer because they recognised issues had become unmanageable and wanted change for the better.

### **3.4.5 Question 4 Theme 3: Support**

#### *Sub-theme A: Whole-family support*

Most information in this theme came from parents and school staff. School staff recognised that TAPS workers were able to offer a more intensive level of support than other services and because TAPS workers support families in their homes they have a good understanding of family dynamics. A greater understanding of family one enabled the TAPS worker to identify a need for targeted support for Darren (P/C); a designated dad’s worker was assigned who could facilitate father-son activities and be a specific support for Darren (P/C). School staff acknowledged that TAPS workers are able to address

issues that fell outside the remit of school staff yet have an impact on school life. For example, Linda (SS) said:

*“... the TAPS team can say things to parents as a teacher you can’t... One of the things I know myself was James (Ch) was the left out child, the lost child and James didn’t get all the treats his sister got and you know there was things going on well you can’t say that as a teacher but somebody working with the family with the parent can say well maybe look at...”*

Karen (P/C) referred to support from Julie (TW) as being a huge element in facilitating the process. Karen (P/C) considered Julie (TW) an ally and was pleased Julie (TW) had been in her home to witness some of the issues she was addressing:

*“... Julie [TW] came round anyway... couldn’t believe it took three of us to get her [Lucy-Ch] out of bed, down the stairs, get her dressed and Julie [TW] could go back to the school and say I’ve been there...it made me feel better cos I knew they [school staff] weren’t sort of against me...”*

Parents also found advice and strategies suggested to them by TAPS workers an important element of the process. All parents felt TAPS workers were available whenever they needed them and thought this important.

#### *Sub-theme B: Type of Support: duration and flexibility*

Participants considered support from TAPS to be more long-term than support accessed from many agencies. In addition, TAPS workers' flexibility, in relation to responding to specific family needs, was referred to positively. For example, Helen (TW) talked about buying resources for the family to address a specific need:

*“Yeh... we had to organise some door and window alarms because he [Ch] was letting himself out very early in the mornings when they [parents] were in bed.”*

Julie (TW) referred to an element of role flexibility which allowed her to offer support to the family which may not otherwise have been possible:

*“The one thing I did which I think was really useful that again you wouldn’t do if you were in social care... I was aware that there was all this fuss around Lucy [Ch] erm because she was challenging... so, at one of the meetings, I suggested that the time when Lucy was at play therapy I went and did some 1:1 sessions with Nicola [sister].”*

#### **3.4.6 Question 4 Theme 4: Roles**

School staff and TAPS workers referred to the TAPS worker role as lead professional as being an important element in the process. Helen (TW) felt taking the lead professional role enabled her to oversee the support the family was receiving:

*“I suppose acting as the lead professional but then while handing over certain aspects of the work that needs doing, you still kind of retain all the knowledge of what’s going on.”*

Participants referred to the TAPS process as enabling a sense of shared responsibility among professionals involved in supporting the family with a clear understanding of individual roles and responsibilities. TAPS workers felt a more open relationship with families was achieved because they were not social care representatives:

*“I think if I’d been a social worker coming in and doing this as a ‘Child in Need’, I wouldn’t have got to know half the stuff that I do because she’d (Karen P/C) just be on her guard all the time thinking I don’t want the girls to be taken away.”*

#### **3.4.7 Question 4 Theme 5: Meetings**

All participants mentioned regular reviews as an important aspect of the TAPS process. Reviews provide the opportunity to share information as well as to update action plans and target setting. Karen (P/C) referred to benefits of TAPS review meetings in the following way:

*“Julie [TAPS worker] is about the girls so I’m finding out how well she’s doing at school and we can pass information on about what she’s doing at Changes [counselling support] so it’s been better all round really.”*



School staff working with two of the families felt hearing things from the parent's point of view was an important element in getting a better understanding of the family which, in turn, enables identification of appropriate support. For example, Linda (SS) shared the following information:

*"... We've never had a problem with James [ch] in school. So, from the school's perspective we wouldn't have been looking at any other involvement but then once the parents come... and start talking about what appeared to be a very different child at home – you think well yes there's an issue and although it might not be in school it's kind of going to impact on the school and you need to give support..."*

School staff referred to TAPS workers making referrals to appropriate agencies as supportive. Specifically, Linda (SS) said Helen (TW) sped up referrals since the school staff did not have to make four or five referrals to different agencies.

#### **3.4.9 Question 4 Theme 6: Professional Development**

TAPS workers and school staff felt the TAPS process encouraged professional development. Helen (TW) found supervision with her line manager useful to explore the most appropriate support for the family; the TAPS worker was new to the role and so sought support from her manager:

*"Discussing the case with her (line manager) in supervision and her giving me a heads up of what's, what's available and she knew a lot more about the separated families project as it was going to become available so erm and obviously the engagement of the family was so much better."*

Gill (PSA) reported the TAPS process provided her with a much better understanding of service and agencies and the support they offer; she felt this was valuable in appropriately supporting other families. Gill (PSA) also felt she had built good relationships with other services and agencies and would be happy to approach them in future.

*"...we all have a great knowledge of certain services but there was agencies like 'Housing xxxxxx' that I didn't know much about... It is through things like that now if*

*parents are having a problem...I now know who to refer to so it does benefit everybody.”*

In addition, the parents and carers talked about having more strategies to manage the behaviour of their children which suggests an element of learning occurred for them as well and for the professionals involved in the process.

Sally shared the following information:

*“A few things I did with James off the Nurturing Programme really helped – just a little chart, he was a different kid overnight.”*

### **3.4.10 Question 4: What supports/constrains this work?**

*This section focuses on constraining factors*

An overview of the five over-arching constraining themes and the sub-themes within is provided in Table 11. Each broad theme is explored in more detail in Appendix C. This information is included in an appendix as it does not directly relate to the research question which focuses on *supportive* elements of the TAPS process.

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Additional information to support theme descriptors</b>
<b>7. Relationships</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Within-family</li> <li>• Family and wider community</li> <li>• School-family</li> </ul>
<b>8. Sharing information</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sharing sensitive information at meetings</li> <li>• Agency protocols / confidentiality (Changes)</li> </ul>
<b>9. Engagement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parent engagement</li> <li>• Attendance at services</li> <li>• Speed of referrals</li> </ul>
<b>10. Gap in Services</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Waiting list</li> <li>• Appropriateness for age of child</li> <li>• Time constraints when TAPS not FIP</li> </ul>
<b>11. Agencies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication between agencies</li> <li>• Attendance at meetings</li> <li>• Consent procedures / protocols</li> <li>• Conflicting focus</li> <li>• Number of agencies involved</li> <li>• Awareness of roles</li> </ul>

**Table 11: Five over-arching themes identified as constraints to TAPS process**

Nb: Numbering (7 to 11) in this table is a continuation from of the numbering from themes identified in Table 10.

#### **3.4.10 Question 5: Who is/could be involved?**

Participants detailed services and agencies which had been involved in the process. The following is a list of all agencies that supported these families in the TAPS process:

- Play therapist
- Children's Fund
- Separating Families
- Relate
- Parent support workers
- Changes counselling service
- School Nurse
- Behaviour support
- Attendance officer
- Domestic violence outreach team
- Health Visitor
- Housing

In families one and three it was felt all appropriate agencies were involved; in family two, school staff felt a representative for the Attendance Team should have been included in the process and Sarah (P/C) felt social service involvement would have been helpful to address some difficulties with her ex-partner.

#### **3.4.11 Question 6: How is the work shared?**

References to how support was agreed and shared out indicated that this occurred during regular TAC reviews.

#### **3.4.12 Question 7: What is being used?**

The following were identified as tools utilised in the TAPS process to support families:

- Phone calls to TAPS workers
- Meetings
- Review process
- Action plans
- Common Assessment Framework

#### **3.4.13 Overview of feedback from the children**

Because of the age of the children, the information discussed during interview does not necessarily fit within the themes identified from the data generated

with adult participants. Therefore, this section gives an overview of the information provided by the children. Throughout discussion it was apparent that the children knew that TAPS were involved because there was something specific that needed to be addressed. James (Ch) recognised that his behaviour was difficult to manage and identified that his mum and dad needed some help with how to manage his behaviour. Sophie (Ch) discussed her parents' relationship and said that because her dad was 'horrible' to her mum they needed somebody to help them. Both children referred to how they thought the TAPS workers had helped their parents:

*"She's (TW) been helping me mam to do things – she's going to college now"*  
(Sophie)

*"She's helped what's going on"*  
(Sophie)

*"Helen (TW) helped my mam and dad to help me be good"*  
(James)

The children talked generally about changes that had occurred since TAPS had been involved. James talked about 'everything working' and Sophie recognised that Lisa (TW) came to the family home regularly to talk to her mum. Specific examples the children gave about how things had changed are detailed below:

*"Everything's been alright – the Police haven't been anymore – it's different now"*  
(Sophie)

*"I've improved with my work and my writing, I'm getting better... I'm remembering to be good and I'm getting on with my work"*  
(Ben)

Quotes from the children suggest the children recognised that the TAPS worker had supported them and their families.

### **3.5 Discussion**

Results indicate there are many aspects of the TAPS process which participants perceive as supportive for vulnerable children and their families. These elements are described in six broad themes: relationships, engagement, whole-family support, roles, meetings and professional development. While the main focus of this research is to identify supportive elements of the TAPS process, constraints cannot be ignored. Information relating to constraining elements of the TAPS process fits into five broad themes: relationships, information sharing, engagement, gap in services and agencies.

Thematic analysis results are consistent with previous findings in this area (Sloper, 2004; Watson, 2006) in that supports and constraints are not always opposites. For example, 'relationships' and 'engagement' feature as themes in both supports and constraints yet many other themes do not feature in both areas. While most participants reported an improvement in relationships between home and school as a result of the TAPS process, school staff working with family three reported feeling that they had less contact with the carer in the family following TAPS involvement. This can be explained by tensions evident in participant interviews. Participants referred to instances when they perceived a sense of 'us and them' and felt they were not being fully listened to. Exploring further these tensions with participants would be interesting but, unfortunately, is not within the scope of this study. Tensions could be explained by differences in participants' ideas about the 'outcome' point on the activity theory triangle. Although participants appeared to be in agreement about the 'object' (i.e. what was being worked on) it might have been that 'outcomes' (i.e. to achieve what / to what end) differed. School staff tend to have a focus on academic outcomes whilst family members and TAPS workers focus on social/behavioural elements. Despite all involved with this family wanting to address 'Lucy's behaviour' it could have been to a different end i.e. school staff focus on the impact of behaviour on academic success whereas TAPS and parents look at it differently and think, instead, about links with emotional wellbeing.

By including parents and children as participants in this research, an additional perspective has been added to the experience of multi-agency working. Studies (Hymans, 2006; Melhuish et al., 2007; Robinson & Cottrell, 2005) have focused on the experiences of professionals working in multi-agency teams. This has provided rich information on professionals' perspectives on how multi-agency working can be better facilitated. However, it fails to recognise the perspectives of the service-users: the very people the teams and ways of working are designed to support. By including the perspectives of the families, there are some differences in the themes identified in this study when comparing with previous literature. Parent participants tended to focus on relationships and support they received; areas such as philosophical positions and professional identity, identified in previous research (Barclay & Kerr, 2006; Edgley & Avis, 2007), did not arise in parent interviews. TAPS workers appeared more aware of their role and the perceptions people hold i.e. it was reported that relationships had been better facilitated with families because TAPS are not Social Care. In addition, the TAPS role enabled flexibility in the support offered to families. This was considered important by all participants.

Working together enabled knowledge to be shared and provided opportunities for professionals working in the process to learn from other agencies supporting the family. Issues experienced by families also provided professional development opportunities for TAPS workers who needed to consult more experienced team members, or those with specialist skills, to problem solve. This supports previous findings which detail integrated working to facilitate knowledge sharing (Watson, 2006).

The general picture from data suggests families were experiencing a number of complex issues and as literature suggests (e.g. Paletz & Schunn, 2010) complex problems often require support from multi-agency teams. Whilst participants reported the complexity of issues sometimes prevented things from moving forward, it is acknowledged that involvement from multiple agencies enabled the range of issues to be addressed. It is important to note that coordination of support would not have been possible without utilisation of

'tools' identified by participants. Participants repeatedly referred to meetings as a crucial element of the process; when explored further, facilitative elements of meetings were identified as regular reviews and action plans which are set out in TAC process. Themes identified as supportive in the TAPS process reflect CWDC findings (2008-9) on positives in the TAC process.

In addition to TAPS workers and school staff, a further 12 agencies were identified as supporting the children and families in some way. Agencies identified can be classified as LA services, national health services and other charitable and voluntary agencies and services (see page 65 for further details). Interestingly, EPs were not listed as an agency supporting families included in the study. Watson (2006) asserts applied psychologists are well-placed to facilitate multi-agency working, particularly in establishing a shared vision, understanding roles and responsibilities, evaluating work and facilitating joint training.

### **3.5.1 Role of EP**

The implementation of ECM and joint children's services has resulted in a greater interest in multi-agency working for EPs (Hughes, 2006). Farrell et al (2006) conclude that EPs are well placed to develop links and build bridges between school and community since multi-agency involvement draws EPs into community contexts. Farrell, et al. (2006) highlight the key reasons for EP involvement in multi-agency work: EPs bring psychological knowledge and skills, they are in a management position in LAs and they are aware of provision and the work of different services in the LA. 95% of respondents in Farrell et al's (2006) study indicated that the EP's specific involvement within the multiple agencies had a high impact upon at least one of the ECM outcomes for the child.

Families included in this research did not have direct involvement from EPs in the multi-agency process supporting them. There is a number of possible explanations for this. Input from EPs to schools in the LA is time limited.

There are over 50% more TAPS workers supporting primary schools in the LA and so it is possible that school priorities did not enable EPs to become involved in supporting the families included in this study. In addition, TAPS is an early intervention service so schools may have involved TAPS to support families as an initial step. Depending on outcomes, EPs may have been involved at a later stage. It is also important to note that EPs in the LA have supported TAPS at a more strategic level by facilitating training for TAPS workers to highlight the importance of areas such as establishing a shared vision, understanding roles and responsibilities and evaluating work, highlighted in Watson's (2006) review as important facilitators of multi-agency working.

Findings from this research should be considered in relation to implications for the design and delivery of EP services. Participants repeatedly referred to the meetings as being a crucial element of the process which helped to address concerns. Specifically, the action plan and target setting aspects of the meetings ensured clarity about who was doing what, for what purpose and by when. This is crucial when people are coming together to work on a shared task and is relevant for EPs who often work with parents, school staff and other agencies to support children and young people. In addition, findings suggest that multi-agency working is effective in supporting vulnerable children and their families; EPs working with this group of people should be aware of the benefits of joining together with other agencies to provide cohesive support. The TAC model which includes regular reviews was repeatedly mentioned as a supportive element of the TAPS process; it would be beneficial for EP services to consider incorporating a plan-do-review model into service delivery to mirror this approach to coordinating support for vulnerable children and their families.

### **3.5.2 Future study**

Tensions identified in Appendix C, which provides an overview of factors perceived as constraining to the TAPS process, related to other agencies and their protocols and procedures. It would have been useful to gather perspectives of other agencies involved in supporting the families to provide



an even richer picture. This, in turn, may have enabled data to be used as a learning tool as in Developmental Work Research and Learning in and for Interagency Working methods. This study applied activity theory principles to provide a snapshot of current perceptions of the TAPS process. Future study concerned with a more developmental aspect would be helpful so that activity theory could be used as a developmental tool (Leadbetter et al 2007). This involves the application of DWR methods to work with staff over time using a series of workshops to reflect and discuss data gathered from observations, visits, meetings and interviews. This would provide opportunities for a project to be developed which employs an interventionist methodology.

There is little evidence on the effectiveness of multi-agency working in producing improved outcomes for children and families (Sloper, 2004); this research focused on supportive elements of TAPS process. In order to plug a research gap, future study should focus on how outcomes have improved for the families involved with TAPS. This is likely to require a long-term study focusing on gathering information on a number of indicators (perhaps including social, emotional and academic achievement of children) pre and post TAPS involvement.

### **3.5.3 Limitations**

Findings from this research are specific to this multi-agency team: 'Team Around the Primary School', therefore, caution should be taken when generalising to other contexts and teams.

Limited data was generated in point 3 of the triangle – 'To what end / To achieve what' – this could be because this point was not fully explored by the researcher and although all participants could identify what they were working on, the data does not provide clear information to indicate they were all working on those things to achieve the same outcome. If this had been explored fully, it may have been an area of potential conflict. This information could have been shared with participants and utilised as a learning tool as in DWR approaches, discussed previously.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

This study provides information on supportive elements of the TAPS process in the form of service-user and service-provider perspectives. Six broad themes are identified as supportive elements and these support previous research findings. Although EPs were not identified as supporting participants in this study, their role in multi-agency working is considered at a strategic level to support in establishing a shared vision, understanding roles and responsibilities and evaluating work within the multi-agency working context.

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### **3.8 Appendix B - TAPS Project Overview**

As part of my doctoral research at Newcastle University I have been asked to carry out some research on TAPS. The focus of this research is to gather information from all partners involved in the TAPS process: children, parents, school staff, TAPS workers, and other agencies. I plan to carry out an interview with each participant separately to gain perspectives and views on the TAPS process and how outcomes have changed/improved as a result of this process; this should take no longer than an hour. I will then pull together the views and perspectives of all those people I have interviewed so that I can feedback to make sure I have represented your opinions and views accurately. The aim of this research is to examine what is currently happening in the TAPS process and identify areas which are working well.

### **3.9 Appendix C – Overview of themes identified as constraining elements of the TAPS process**

#### *Q4 Theme 7: Relationships*

This theme falls into three sub-themes:

- Within-family relationships
- Family-wider community relationships
- School – family relationships

#### *Q4 Theme 7 sub-theme A: Within-family relationships*

Sally and Darren (P/C) were experiencing relationship issues which Helen (TW) arranged support for. However, the following quote highlights the need for Helen (TW) to prioritise support in terms of when it is most appropriate:

*“...we referred mam and dad to counselling because we thought there was no point in putting any parenting programme in place - one was doing one thing and one was doing the other and they were fighting about who was right...”*

#### *Q4 Theme 7 sub-theme B: Family-wider community relationships*

Sally and Darren (P/C) experienced relationship problems with the wider community related to a family bereavement; this made it very difficult for the family to access certain support from community services. Consequently, alternative services needed to be identified:

*“She [Sally] didn’t want him to go to Children’s Fund because the local one is at XXXX Residents [local community centre]. She won’t let him go in there because of certain people who go in there who gave her a hard time when the baby died.”*

#### *Q4 Theme 7 sub-theme C: School-family relationships*

School staff involved with family two reported that since TAPS had initiated involvement with the family they had not seen the carer as much:

*“See I feel like I get on well with Nana but I feel that since the TAPS she has moved further away...”*



In family two tensions were evident between participants. School staff supporting this family reported a feeling of 'us and them', describing feelings of the TAPS workers as being on the family's 'side':

*"Barbara [behaviour support] was more on our side, trying to address the behaviour problems and Julie was trying to focus more on what they were doing well..."*

#### *Q4 Theme 8: Sharing Information*

Parents interviewed in families one and two both expressed concerns about sensitive information being shared for the first time in meetings involving lots of participants. Sally (P/C) shared the following:

*"The first meeting they informed me James had said he'd had hold of a real gun, I was mortified, absolutely mortified."*

*"I'm thinking I'm going into a meeting to discuss school work or James's behaviour at home and all of a sudden I get told, a bombshell dropped on me and you don't know where to put your face."*

In response to being asked what could have been done differently in the meetings to have better supported the process, Karen (P/C) shared the following:

*"Yeh, the kids had nits every time I went – I did get upset and paranoid over it because it was like because I've got a social worker and because I'm with TAPS and everything, it was aimed at me...and I got really upset over it but apart from that everything at the meetings has been fine."*

School staff working with Karen's family found it frustrating that information from the counselling support the child received could not be shared at meetings. While they recognised the nature and confidentiality of the information they felt it would have been useful for some of the information to be shared so that support could be continued in school, if appropriate.

#### *Q4 Theme 9: Engagement*

Professionals referred to a frustration with Sarah's family related to parental engagement; the parents in this family were separated and the father was reluctant to access any support or to come onboard with the TAPS process.

In addition, Sarah (P/C) needed to give consent to having the child's father involved and she kept changing her mind about his involvement. School staff and the TAPS worker involved with the family felt this sometimes prevented things from moving in the right direction. In Karen's family, there were some issues with attendance at appointments and school staff expressed the following concerns about this:

*"We were told that somebody would be picking her up but that didn't always happen"  
"Lucy had built herself up and was really excited to go and then nobody turned up and we'd have a bad afternoon, which was understandable."*

#### *Q4 Theme 10: Gap in services*

All participants working with Karen's family expressed concern about appropriate counselling support being available for the child. One service had a long waiting list and the only other service available did not typically work with children as young as Lucy (Ch). Lisa (TW) expressed concern about team resources in relation to the amount of time available to work with the family:

*"I think one thing that frustrated me at first was... there was that many issues and with all my other cases I just didn't feel that I had enough time to spend on it."*

#### *Q4 Theme 11: Agencies*

A difficulty in communicating with specific agencies was detailed as a factor which constrained work in the TAPS process. Dependent on the set-up of agencies and services, communication pathways were not always clear. In addition, in some cases, agency/service consent procedures and protocols caused a barrier. In family three all participants thought that too many people were involved and there was a lack of clarity about who was doing what:

*"...at first what happened was there was like loads of people doing the same thing... so what we had to do at the next meeting was for people to pull back and leave me as the main focus along with the [DV] worker – she was doing her part and I was doing the main support thing." TAPS worker.*