The contribution of knowing practice to the theory–practice 'divide' in global learning

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Abstract

This article draws on research exploring how practitioners in development education centres (DECs) in England conceptualise global learning and understand the relationship between theory and practice. It responds to ongoing critique that when it comes to practice, there is a lack of clarity and reflection on conceptual and theoretical issues, and their implications for what practitioners know and do. Informed by critical grounded theory, the research analysed data obtained through focus groups which were designed to engage practitioners in a process of reflecting on their work collaboratively and critically. While findings from an early analysis of responses appeared to support arguments about a weak theory–practice relationship, revisiting participants' emphasis on what they do as *practice* prompted exploration of the literature on similar debates in wider professional contexts. This introduced insights centred on concepts of embodied and 'knowing practice'. Applying these concepts back to the data supported evidence of a more complex and symbiotic relationship between theory and practice in some participants' responses. This was significant in reframing the theory–practice divide assumed by the research aims, shifting the emphasis from knowledge *to* practice, and opening up questions

about what knowledge and practice means in the context of DECs. It also empowered practitioners by alerting them to possibilities for engaging more actively with knowledge and transforming their practice collectively.

Introduction

While there are growing calls for education to respond to interrelated global challenges such as the climate emergency, fragmented world views and inequalities exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, much of the support for global learning continues to be led by civil society and non-government organisations (NGOs) located outside mainstream education. Where, historically, this work may have originated in larger NGOs, such as Oxfam and Christian Aid, smaller grass-roots organisations known as development education centres (DECs) have played a key role in sustaining the space of global learning in England and the wider UK (Bourn, 2015).

DECs came into existence in the context of efforts by government departments and larger NGOs to raise awareness of and support for international development and aid. Although DECs have at various times received funding from central government and larger NGOs, they have continued to operate as a network of small, autonomous and regionally based organisations. At various times this network has coalesced more formally, most recently as the Consortium of Development Education Centres (CoDEC). This has increased the DECs' capacity to offer training and other initiatives through programmes funded by central government via organisations such as the British Council. Their sources of funding have also diversified over the years. At the same time, lack of consistent funding and political will to support global learning as an explicit policy aim has contributed to keeping DECs on the margins of mainstream education.

There is no standard profile for those working in DECs, but, broadly speaking, many practitioners have worked or volunteered in international development, school teaching or roles linked to education or community development (Skinner and Baillie Smith, 2015). Moreover, where the work of DECs originated in raising awareness about poverty and development, it now encompasses the full breadth of what might be termed 'global issues'. This is reflected in changes in language and terminology: while DECs retain the label of development education, their work is now framed by the broader concept of global learning (CoDEC, n.d). Their activities also extend across young people and adults in formal, non-formal and informal contexts, although work with schools has always been a strong feature of practice in England (Brown, 2013).

Notwithstanding the impact of external factors of precarious funding and political support, other factors more internal to DECs have been seen to play a role in keeping them at the margins of the mainstream. In the first major piece of research to investigate DECs in England, Ann McCollum (1996) sought to address what she saw as the central problem of marginalisation of DECs. She did this by critically analysing the theory and practice of development education, and both the internal and external conditions shaping the work of DECs. Her analysis found that because DECs had evolved largely through grass-roots practice, there had been insufficient attention to theorisation and a lack of 'internal critique' about conceptual, theoretical and political issues, and their implications for practice. McCollum was particularly concerned with what she saw as assumptions made about Freire's influence on practice, without practitioners engaging actively with the challenges raised by applying his ideas in very different contexts to those in which they originated. Linked to this was a concern about the influence of 'global education' initiatives emerging in parallel to development education that, for McCollum (1996: 45), risked obscuring the more radical 'roots and philosophy' of DECs. These initiatives included ideas emanating from the Centre of Global Education York led by Graham Pike and David Selby.

While McCollum's research now stands at some distance, it remains one of the very few in-depth studies of DECs or similar organisations. Her arguments have also resurfaced in ongoing critique of the way in which development education, and its current iteration as global learning, is conceptualised and relates to the agendas and contexts through which it takes place. For some, weak conceptualisation and theorisation have continued to undermine DECs' distinctive contribution to education and social change (Marshall, 2005; Bourn, 2015). For others, concerns about conceptualisation focus on challenging technical–economic, liberal humanist and other hegemonic agendas at play in global learning discourses, and the ambiguities and contradiction between these and more critical aspirations (Marshall, 2011; Dillon, 2017). These meet with concerns that merging distinct fields such as development education and other issue-based educations under the umbrella of the 'global' risks conceptual confusion and loss of criticality in meeting with mainstream development and education agendas (Mannion et al., 2011; McCloskey, 2016). Overarching all of these are concerns about the growing neoliberalisation of contexts for DEC practice (Khoo and McCloskey, 2015; Dillon, 2018).

In response to the critiques outlined, attempts have been made to develop global learning as a more coherent, distinct and ethically informed approach (Andreotti, 2006; Marshall, 2011). Some of these respond to perceptions that theory is too disconnected from practice by translating theoretical concepts into frameworks and tools for practitioners. Where these frameworks and tools draw explicitly on Freirean and postcolonial thinking, they support arguments for global learning as a form of critical pedagogy (Brown, 2013; Blackmore, 2014). As the literature has expanded, attempts have been made to combine critical and post-critical perspectives with insights from wider theories of learning and disciplines beyond education (Bourn, 2015). This has enriched the possibilities for theoretical insights, but attracted critique about the danger of a 'theoretically loose' (Khoo, 2015: 109) approach, in keeping with McCollum's (1996) concerns. It is also not clear to what extent these developments influence what practitioners know and do, or how they perceive the theory–practice relationship.

Since McCollum (1996) only a very small number of studies have explored practitioner perspectives, experience and the application of theory to practice in the context of DECs or similar organisations. These studies can be divided broadly into two approaches. The first approach consists of studies exploring practitioner perspectives, experience and conceptual aspirations, including the perspectives of practitioners in NGOs beyond DECs (Marshall, 2005; Ellis, 2013; Skinner and Baillie Smith, 2015; Dillon, 2017; Coelho et al., 2018). The second approach is reflected in studies which focus on analysing and clarifying the potential of global learning as critical pedagogy, drawing on perspectives from DEC practitioners, teachers and participants in formal and non-formal education (Brown, 2013; Blackmore, 2014). Notwithstanding these, McCollum's (1996) study remains the most specific and in-depth exploration of DECs in England and the wider UK.

Researching through critical grounded theory

Building on McCollum (1996) the research discussed here sought to explore how practitioners in DECs in England conceptualise global learning and understand the relationship between theory and practice. It responded to the findings in McCollum (1996), ongoing concerns and the absence of practitioner voices and experiences in global learning literature and research (Skinner and Baillie Smith, 2015). A further influencing factor here was the fact that I am also a DEC practitioner who consciously and deliberately identified with participants and their concerns. I saw this research as an opportunity to empower DECs in the face of more dominant agendas, contexts and critiques impacting their work (Charmaz, 2017).

Following careful consideration of the research aims, my 'insider' role and how to capture participants' realities as far as possible, I decided upon the methodological approach of critical grounded theory (CGT). CGT follows the traditional grounded theory approach of 'constant comparison', whereby 'all pieces of data are constantly compared to one another in the process of abstracting codes to analytic categories' (Hense and McFerran, 2016: para 14). However, what distinguishes CGT within the evolving collection of

methods to which the term can be applied, is that it is both constructivist and participatory. It recognises the inevitability of researchers bringing existing experience, ideas and knowledge to the research. It is also clear that any meaning made of participants' realities is still socially constructed (Oliver, 2011). For this reason, and unlike more traditional grounded theory approaches, CGT allows for a 'preliminary' literature review as long as it does not define the research. This can be followed by a 'secondary' review at a later stage of analysis (Giles et al., 2013). This constructivist approach combines with a participatory paradigm to encourage a process of 'collaborative reflexivity' with and between participants (Hense and McFerran, 2016).

Informed by CGT, the data collection and analysis took place through a series of face-to-face and online focus groups with 22 practitioners, employed across 13 DECs located in various geographical regions in England; 17 practitioners had 4 or more years' experience of working or volunteering with a DEC, and 10 had between 10 and 40 years' experience. At least 13 participants had worked previously as teachers, and the majority of participants were educated to degree level. Combined with the fact that most participants defined themselves as 'White British', these attributes suggested little change since McCollum's (1996: 6) observation that development education (and global learning) remains the 'preserve of the white middle class'.

The first phase of data collection took place through face-to-face focus groups. I developed an interview schedule which combined the use of open-ended questions with visual and text-based stimuli and participatory group activities. Stimuli included images, quotations, concepts and frameworks inspired by the preliminary literature review. They were assembled to offer participants a breadth of stimuli and the kind of 'theoretical pluralism' advocated in constructivist grounded theory (Thornberg, 2012: 250). Activities ranged from 'icebreakers' designed to open out conversations and encourage participation, to those oriented more towards provoking dialogue and promoting the 'creative potential' of groups (Hall, 2005, as cited in Cohen et al., 2011: 39). For example, one activity invited participants to work in subgroups to select, prioritise and organise terms and concepts into a conceptual framework for global learning. I followed this by asking questions about participants' choices, and probing responses with more open-ended prompts, such as 'can you explain …', 'tell me more …' and 'anything you would want to add or change …?'.

By inviting participants to engage in activities likely to be familiar to their practice, I was seeking to redress the power imbalance between us and maximise participation. It allowed me to facilitate rather than lead conversations, and encouraged participants to build on ideas collectively, and to organise, document and clarify their thinking in the process. It also allowed me to share concepts and frameworks from the preliminary literature review and to explore how far participants were familiar with these, their theoretical and ideological influences, and the tensions between them. Throughout this first phase of data collection I embarked on the grounded theory process of opening up and making comparisons between segments of data and applying codes. In parallel to this, I both revisited and moved beyond earlier literature by conducting a secondary literature review. This supported the process by helping me to clarify codes and identify those most relevant to the research problem which might form a key category; a precursor to formulating theory (Cohen et al., 2011).

Early analysis of the data showed that how practitioners conceptualised global learning aligned closely with suggestions in recent literature that it is a 'process-orientated' approach, which is holistic and underpinned by moral and political aims and values (Coelho et al., 2018: 42). This analysis also exposed some of the ambiguities, tensions and competing discourses in conceptualisation, for example between an emphasis on global learning as a vehicle for change on the one hand, and increasingly open-ended on the other (Bourn, 2015; Skinner and Baillie Smith, 2015). As Dillon (2017) argues, these raise important questions for practitioners about matters of consensus in what global learning means, as well as its criticality and politics. However, by moving repeatedly between data and codes and both revisiting and expanding upon literature in the secondary review, my attention was drawn to participants' emphasis on global learning as *practice*. This introduced the possibility to bring a new lens to bear on the theory–practice relationship in the context of DECs.

Returning to a second phase of data collection, I followed up with the same participants in online groups. This allowed me to share interim findings, including the emphasis found on practice. It also allowed me to share insights from the literature on embodied and 'knowing practice' (Kemmis, 2005: 13) and to invite participants to respond and co-construct knowledge in keeping with the methodological approach of CGT.

Global learning as embodied practice

That participants in this study talked about global learning as practice is perhaps not surprising. An emphasis on practice was assumed in the initial aims of the research in highlighting a potential theory–practice tension. It is reflected in literature referencing DECs (Heater, 1980; Bourn, 2015), in their origins as grass-roots organisations and in their current expressed aims to 'support and deliver global learning in schools and communities' (CoDEC, n.d.: n.p.). In focus groups, participants talked of being 'grounded in practice'. For some, this was associated with the intrinsic complexity of global learning and making it accessible for those with whom practitioners work (Coelho et al., 2018). It was also associated with making it 'practically useful' and 'doing something in practice'.

The concerns to make global learning accessible, practical and actionable could be explained to some extent by DECs' need to meet with expectations set by the contexts for their work, especially schools. However, it was concomitant at times with suggestions that theory was too abstract and detached from practice. It was not that participants did not recognise or value the contribution that theory could make; there were many references to the influence of ideas from Paolo Freire and Vanessa Andreotti in particular. For some participants, the problem was lack of time to engage with theory and research. Generally, responses indicated that many participants welcomed the space offered by focus groups to come together and reflect on their work. Moreover, for at least one participant, the experience of encountering a theoretical framework shared as a stimulus in a focus group was a 'gift' in articulating 'something I hadn't really been able to articulate'. What emerged through group discussions was a range of perspectives, between those suggesting a theory–practice disconnect and those suggesting a more complex relationship, in the responses shared below. In the first response, the reference to 'innovative methodologies' included methods used in practice, such as Philosophy for Children. What this participant appears to suggest is that while a 'theoretical background' exists, 'methodologies' may be the vehicle for applying theory in practice, although the relationship between theory and methods here is not clear. However, the second response actively suggests that practitioners have a role in 'translating' theoretical ideas for practice:

> My initial reaction is that as a practitioner really that the theoretical background isn't forefront in my mind all the time, I'm thinking about the issues, we're thinking about how to present them using really innovative methodologies to engage people with them.

> So the translation thing, being quite important, the translating between the more theoretical research, I think I've always done that, and for teachers to be able to practically grasp things and engage with research more easily, because there's being, it's like being an intermediary almost.

The concern of some practitioners to make global learning accessible resonated with literature on developing tools for practice and wider debates about the purpose of education and the relationship between theory and practice. For instance, in their reflection on the process of developing a tool for practitioners, Andreotti and de Souza (2008: 30) note a tension between a framing of theoretical language as 'elitist, abstract and excluding' and a framing of practice as 'transparent, straightforward and procedural'. They associate this with a 'technicist' view of education which blinds practitioners to the theoretical foundations for their practice. This tension is reflected in wider concerns about the risk of situating language outside theory, complexity and power in calls to make it more accessible (Giroux, 1992) and an 'anti-intellectual *Zeitgeist*' promoted by technicist agendas (Bamber et al., 2016: 6). It also

forms part of the critique of global learning practice which links weak conceptualisation with its failure to engage more critically with hegemonic and instrumentalising agendas. Elsewhere, Andreotti (2016: 105) argues that attempting to make global learning intelligible for its audiences can limit its potential by seeking to meet with 'normalised' world views.

While early analysis of some participants' calls to make theory more accessible pointed to a technicist and anti-theoretical discourse, the suggestions by others of a more complex theory–practice relationship prompted more comparison of data and literature on wider contexts for professional practice. This led me to debates about a theory–practice divide in teacher education, where the work is similarly 'inherently situated, relational and practical' (Ord and Nuttal, 2016: 359). Ord and Nuttall (2016: 356) see this divide as a tension between future teachers calling for more practical or 'craft' knowledge to apply in practice, and teacher educators' emphasis on theoretical knowledge as the foundation for critically reflective practice. They address this by exploring how future teachers come to know whatever knowledge they have. In doing so, Ord and Nuttall (2016: 356–7) challenge unhelpful distinctions between 'knowing' and 'doing', question assumptions that formal knowledge can easily be transferred to practice and, drawing on practice theories, argue that what future teachers in their study are seeking is an 'embodied' sense of understanding teaching through which to connect theory with practice.

Among the small number of studies of global learning practice in contexts directly relatable to DECs, Skinner and Baillie Smith's (2015) exploration of practitioners' perspectives across different country contexts also defines what practitioners do as *embodied practice*. Arguing for the need for more systematic engagement with the way practitioners experience and negotiate the conceptual and contextual challenges of what they do, they define embodied practice as 'shaped by the dynamically evolving knowledges, emotions, creativities and coping strategies of the GE [global education] practitioners themselves' (Skinner and Baillie Smith, 2015: 27). Alerted to an emphasis on practice by participants in my research, I found that the concept of embodiment resonated with participants when shared as part of interim findings in online focus groups. Evidence of this can be seen in the responses below. The first response resonates with Skinner and Baillie Smith's (2015: 27) emphasis on 'emotions, creativities and coping strategies', in the tension between this participant's activist drive and the 'emotional drain' of working in a context of underfunding, overwork and 'all that stuff'. The second and third responses emphasise 'doing', self-development and 'actually experiencing it', suggesting that, like Ord and Nuttall's (2016: 360) future teachers, DEC practitioners might also be seeking an embodied sense of what they do in connecting theory to practice through 'felt experience':

> So there's the internal, so my drive as somebody who is an activist, who believes in this, that has an influence on my work, but also the emotional drain of working in a context where we're underfunded, overworked, all that kind of stuff.

> It is, should change you because you've experienced it, so you're not just learning about the theory of it, you're not just learning in support of development, but you're developing yourself, teacher and pupil, developing yourself by the fact that you're doing [global learning].

> As you go on, the more you realise the theory behind what you're doing, it becomes more and more relevant because you're actually experiencing it.

Drawing on the concept of embodiment offered an alternative perspective on the theory–practice divide suggested in the rationale for my research and in the early data analysis. This was supported by Skinner and Baillie Smith's (2015) emphasis on the *doing* of global learning as embodied practice, and by evidence from studies addressing similar debates on theory–practice relationships in contexts relatable to DECs. This is not to deny the tensions raised by responses which appeared resistant to theoretical knowledge and engaging with the complexities and issues of power inherent in global learning. However, revisiting Ord and Nuttall (2016) also drew my attention to Kemmis's (2005) work on theorising practice, and further insights into rethinking theory, knowledge and practice in the context of DECs.

Global learning as knowing practice

Stephen Kemmis (2013: 2) has described 'thinking about practice with colleagues' since the late 1990s. In an early iteration of this thinking, Kemmis (2005: 1) draws on Aristotle's distinction between practical, technical and theoretical reasoning to highlight the role of practical reasoning in understanding how practitioners think in the course of 'doing' a practice. Where theoretical reasoning is distinguished by the 'attainment of knowledge for its own sake', and technical reasoning by the more instrumentalising 'production of something', practical reasoning is distinguished by 'practical wisdom and knowledge', 'praxis' and 'doing-action'. Kemmis (2005: 2) argues that while practical reasoning may involve drawing on existing resources of professional practice knowledge, it also involves practitioners engaging in a highly reflexive process of 'searching for saliences' and ideas from their whole life experience. It means taking account of their own and others' intentions, interests, meanings, understandings and values, and the likely consequences of their actions, revealed through the 'action and interaction' of their practice (Kemmis, 2005: 2).

In developing his argument, Kemmis (2005) draws on a wide range of theories of practice knowledge, including Higgs et al.'s (2001) attempt to characterise practice knowledge and challenge the theory–practice divide. He invokes the concept of 'craft knowledge' to highlight the way in which this is situated, embodied and unfolding in time, involving 'knowledge in the face of uncertainty' and practitioners engaging in practical reasoning, deliberation and 'exploratory action' (Kemmis, 2005: 10, 12). Again, and in keeping with the concept of searching for saliences, it means practitioners being alert to subjective and objective conditions, and being ready to adapt to the particular situation of their practice as it unfolds. It is through this process of ongoing attentiveness to what happens in practice that practitioners engage in what Kemmis (2005: 13) terms 'knowing practice', combining 'the sense in which a person comes to know what a particular kind of practice is' and 'a sense that one knows what one is doing when one engages in practice, and reflexively becomes more knowing as one continues to practice'.

Revisiting the data and range of responses across focus groups in light of Kemmis's (2005) ideas, it was possible to see evidence of technical reasoning in some participants' emphasis on making global learning practical and actionable. It was also possible to see some of the features of practical reasoning he extrapolates to inform knowing practice. Evidence for this is provided in the extract of dialogue between two participants in Box 1. The first participant's reference to 'trainer competencies', 'having the resources at your fingertips' and 'having read up what is best to do' are all in keeping with professional practice knowledge. However, the same participant goes beyond this to search for saliences in terms of 'having had contact with lots of other knowledges and ways of being'. This is developed through references to 'paternalistic and universalising' and 'having explored those issues for oneself, one would be in a better position to deal with them in a training situation'. At the same time, both participants engage in a process of weighing their knowledge and subjectivities against the intentions of teachers. This is exemplified by both participants' recognition of the 'complexity' of the issues at hand, and the second participant's emphasis on being 'open, reflective' and 'prepared to change our minds'. It suggests the kind of reflexive and unfolding understanding that Kemmis (2005) explicated through concepts of 'knowledge in the face of uncertainty', 'exploratory action' and craft knowledge.

In addition to the features of practical reasoning indicated in the dialogue in Box 1, the potential for knowing practice could also be seen in the way that these and other participants implicitly and explicitly connected theory to practice. In Box 1, both participants could be said to draw implicitly on postcolonial theory in their concerns about teachers as 'paternalistic and universalising'. This analysis was supported by explicit references in focus groups to the influence of Andreotti's (2006) concepts of 'soft' and 'critical' global citizenship education on practitioners' attempts to move teachers from '*paternalistic*' approaches to those more orientated towards social justice. It was supported further by the many references to Andreotti's influence on practice in the literature (Brown, 2013; Blackmore, 2014; Bourn, 2015; Pashby and Sund, 2020).

> **Box 1: Dialogue between two participants**
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> **Participant 1:** If you're talking about being practical, then there's a whole lot of trainer competencies, for example, which you might tick off, and a lot of these would be about being well prepared and having the resources at your fingertips, and having read up what is best to do, all those sorts of things. And then there would be … having some deep values and having reflected on these values, and having had contact with lots of other knowledges and ways of being, that mean that if something came up, for example universalism, let's say, which does come up. So, for example, a teacher seems terribly well intentioned, but she or he is talking about how wonderful it's been that they've raised all this money for a school to get a new classroom or something like that, and I guess embodied and knowing practice would be to know how to handle that, to sort of be aware of the complexity of it, that you know it's best of intentions, but in fact it could be coming across as quite paternalistic and universalising and so on, and having explored those issues for oneself, one would be in a better position to be able to deal with that in a training situation perhaps.
>
> **Participant 2:** and maybe that knowing is having that open, reflective, that ability to question and just being aware that we're so often wrong about things, so being prepared to change our minds. So I was thinking about the whole charity thing, and I always find that really difficult, because I think it's never as simple as all that, and when people want to give money to charity, it's complex isn't it, and it's easy to say all charity is bad, but then there are aspects of when people, it's because people care.

Implications for knowledge and practice

The starting point for the research summarised here was a theory–practice tension suggested in the literature on global learning practice. Subsequently, this was identified as a recurring theme in wider contexts of professional practice, and specifically in teacher education where similar theory–practice debates prevail. By adopting a critical grounded theory approach to data collection and analysis, I strove to ensure that the research process was as collaborative, reflexive and grounded in participants' realities as possible. This iterative approach of moving repeatedly between data and literature, and paying attention to what participants were saying, was important for eliciting new insights into their responses. It was important especially because practitioners are 'always doing more than they say they are doing, more than they know they are doing, so they are doing more than they know and they are doing multiple things at the same time' (Kemmis, 2017: n.p.).

While early findings suggested the potential for an anti-theoretical stance on the part of some participants, other responses suggested a more complex and symbiotic theory–practice relationship. By revisiting these through the lens of embodied and knowing practice, it was possible to see that some practitioners engage in a process of practical reasoning through being alert to objective and subjective conditions and consequences, and drawing in ideas and knowledge from wider experience. It is also through this process of action and interaction in the particular contexts and situations of their practice that practitioners reflexively become more knowing about what they do. These findings were significant for:

- challenging a theory–practice divide and shifting the emphasis from knowledge to practice
- opening up questions about what knowledge and practice means in the context of DECs
- empowering practitioners in their relationship with knowledge and their potential to transform practice collectively.

That the relationship between theory and practice was found to be more complex and symbiotic, at least for some practitioners, challenged the emphasis on a theory–practice divide assumed at the beginning of the research. It supported calls for the need to engage with practitioners' experiences and what they do as embodied practice. By drawing on the concepts of embodiment and knowing practice, the focus of the research shifted from epistemological questions about how practitioners know what they are doing and what they need to know, to those oriented towards ontological questions which emphasise the 'happenstance' of practice (Kemmis, 2017: n.p.). It could also be said to support those attempts to develop

a more coherent relationship between theory, practice and critical pedagogy through practitioners' use of methods to engage others with global issues.

Challenging the theory–practice divide acted to reframe this relationship by shifting the focus from knowledge *to* practice, and inviting more questioning of what knowledge and practice means in the context of DECs. It challenged the tendency to privilege theoretical knowledge over practical knowledge as if it is more legitimate, by recognising the value of practical reasoning and knowing practice (Kemmis and Smith, 2008). While the dialogue shared in Box 1 alludes to 'other knowledges and ways of being', another participant was more explicit in challenging traditional sources of theory to argue for 'organic theorising' that 'young people are now formulating around ideas of social justice and engagement'. This reflects the situated and embodied nature of practice 'where it meets people's lives' (Kemmis, 2005: 17).

It was an explicit aim of this research to empower practitioners. This responded to their lack of power relative to the contexts and critiques impacting on their work, and the absence of their voices and experiences in research. It was supported by offering participants a space to come together and reflect on their work collaboratively. This process paved the way for disrupting the theory–practice divide, shifting the emphasis from knowledge to practice, and pushing the onus back on to researchers to engage with practitioners and their concerns (Baillie Smith, 2013; Blackmore, 2014). At the same time, it brought about insights beyond what practitioners might say they are doing individually. It alerted participants to theories developed from contexts relatable to DECs which could respond to calls for better theorising of practice. It also brought to the fore tensions relating to competing discourses. This reinforces calls for practitioners to engage more actively with the knowledge and debates in the literature, and highlights the need for more opportunities for practitioners to reflect on their work collectively.

These findings resonate with Kemmis's (2005: 22) argument that practice cannot be understood solely in terms of knowledge 'in the heads' of individual practitioners, but in what he referred to as 'extra-individual features' (a term he later revised to clarify his intended meaning) or the wider discursive, historical, material and social conditions shaping practice. This, in turn, supports his argument that developing knowing practice, which is also alert to these conditions, and transforming practice, is best achieved through communities of practice in which 'people can converse openly, freely, critically and self-critically about the nature, meaning and consequences of what they are doing' (Kemmis, 2005: 3). Moreover, such communities do not mean everyone 'needs to "have" all of the relevant knowledge and skills in any deep sense', but rather 'that the *place* of this knowledge and skill is recognised by a wide part of the community' (Kemmis, 2005: 16). This responds to findings in this study about both the range of perspectives and knowledge between participants, where not everyone could be said to be engaged in knowing practice. It also supports the suggestion of more opportunities for practitioners to build on their collective capacity and engage in collaborative reflexivity on practice.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The author declares that research ethics approval for this article was provided by Lancaster University's ethics board.

Consent for publication statement

The author declares that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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