

Institution: Leeds Trinity University (LTU)		
Unit of Assessment: Education		
Title of case study: Giving a voice to marginalised and socially disadvantaged children, families and adults in vulnerable contexts.		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2009 to 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Susan Elmer	Role(s) (e.g., job title): Senior Lecturer	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 1 September 2009-present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2013 - 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>This case study describes the impacts of research including enhancing the agency of marginalised children and families through participatory qualitative research projects, conducted using collaborative approaches with families and practitioners by Elmer (2009-2020). These studies ensured improved agency for children, families and adults in vulnerable contexts accessing education and social care services. The impact can be seen in changes to practice including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decision-making, assessment and intervention processes in services for vulnerable children, their families and adults in vulnerable contexts. (R1, R2), • Playful research approaches which can enhance children's active participation in research on practice that directly affects them. (R2, R6, S1, S5). 		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>The following studies share a careful and sensitive participatory research design conducted with community-based social care practitioners, marginalised families and vulnerable learning disabled care leavers as stakeholders. These qualitative studies used sensitive and ethical design for the research questions to enable participants to have a voice in decision making and service delivery. (R1, R6). In each study Elmer employed a phased approach, with user consultation in research design, ethical consent, data collection, thematic analysis and writing up findings. Typically research design and data collection included 4 stages, including initial consultation with participants and practitioners to develop a research design, followed by focus group interviews, observation and support group participation as data collection and finally consultation to ensure that the findings were authentic and reflected participants' lived experiences (R2). Given the highly sensitive nature of the research processes, researcher reflection was built into each stage to allow adjustments as required, this included safeguarding concerns (R2, R4).</p> <p><i>Study 1: Early Intervention in Domestic Violence (2010-2011):</i> (£10k) Leeds City Council (LCC) awarded to Leeds Beckett University (LBU) with Elmer, (at LTU) conducted through the oversight of a multi-agency steering group of Leeds partner agencies, including Early Years, Social Services, the Police and Gipsil, (a Leeds supported housing provider), to identify best practice in early intervention. (R5, S3). Elmer acted as Principal Investigator in this study which included 15 families and was designed in collaboration with domestic violence practitioners and women survivors as stakeholders, this was vital in engaging marginalised and hard to reach families (R1), ensuring their confidence in the research. The research required a sensitive approach to design and data collection and necessitated their direct involvement to ensure their empowerment through building trust and rapport. The researchers attended support groups, as an important means of building</p>		

confidence with women participants. They conducted two focus groups and follow up individual interviews with six women survivors plus eight key stakeholder practitioners. At each stage **women participants were consulted to ensure their active and authentic participation (S3).**

In a subsequent qualitative study Adhikari and Elmer (2015-18) a family case study enabled the collection of **rich data. Creative approaches to research with children, including sand play and art** were used to engage with **young children's experiences of domestic abuse**, enabling them to have **an authentic voice (R6, S4).**

Study 2: Independent living services for care leavers with mild to moderate learning disability' Action for Children (£5k) awarded to LBU (2010) with Elmer at LTU. Practitioners and the **care leaver young people** directly engaged in research design, developed to reflect their cognitive impairment. **A play-based (say and play) approach to ethical consent** was developed to ensure **that they understood the nature and purpose of the research questions, could give informed consent** and could express **their authentic views about services they received. (R2).**

Study 3: South Leeds Family Group Conferences (FGC) pilot study (2009, **R3, S3**). This study, commissioned by LCC and awarded to LBU with Elmer at LTU, used **participant observation** of 12 FGCs plus **follow up interviews with FGC co-ordinators. Children's participation in FGCs** was a consideration for the researchers (R3, S3) and a **child friendly research tool** was developed to **enable their active participation.**

Key findings of these related studies:

- **vulnerable women and children need research strategies** that enable them to **give authentic feedback (R6)**
- **play-based research methods enabled children to have a voice** in services they may need. (**R2, R3, R5**)
- **marginalised families** can feel **empowered by participation in research studies**, designed to meet their needs as participants (**R1, R3**).

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

R1 Frost, N., Elmer S., Best L. and Mills S (September 2010) Ensuring access and inclusion for disadvantaged children in extended services: identifying the barriers and promoting choice. *British Journal of Special Needs Education*. Vol 37, 3, pp113-121.

R2 Elmer, S. and Frost, N. (2012). 'Playful practice in qualitative research: Findings ways to evaluate the impact of services for care leavers with mild to moderate learning disability'. *British Journal of Play Therapy*, Vol. 8 (2012), pp 38-49.

R3 Frost, N., (with Elmer S., 2009) An Evaluation of South Leeds Family Group Conference Service in Leeds. in Frost N., Abbott, S. and Race, T. (2015) *Family Support: Prevention, Early Intervention and Early Help*, p123. (see **S3**).

R4 Elmer S. (2016) Safeguarding, child protection and children in need in the early years *In The Complete Companion for Teaching and Leading Practice in the Early Years*. Jarvis, P., George, J., Holland, W. & Doherty, J. (eds.). 3rd ed. Pp76-98.

R5 Elmer S. (2017) Social Justice in Local Government: A delicate balance: in: *Becoming Citizens: Perspectives on Social Justice in the 21st Century*. Mealey, A. M. Jarvis, P., Doherty J. and Fook J. (Eds). Routledge. Pp 130-144.

R6: Jones, P. & Elmer, S., (2019) 'Opening Play: Play therapy and dramatherapy' Chapter in *Perspectives on Play: Learning for Life*. Brock, A., Jarvis, P. & Olusoga, Y. (eds.). 3rd ed. Oxon: Routledge, p. 290- 308.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)**Impact on Practice**

These studies have made a **distinctive contribution** to evaluating services for vulnerable children, families and adults in the North of England **to give children a voice** and to **improve outcomes in practice (R6, S1)**. They demonstrate that **marginalised, at risk families can act as co-constructors in sensitive research to improve service delivery**. The Domestic Abuse research project (R4) in which **Elmer acted as Principal Investigator**, influenced an **increasing focus on multi agency early intervention to enhance quality of life** in cases where **domestic abuse is or has been an issue in families** and who may need access to children's services support (S3).

Describing the project, a steering group member commented:

'It is genuinely innovative and a partnership and it is a small investment for potentially quite a large return. It is a local response based on improving those services that are in most contact with families and children, to do a better job'. (Elmer et al 2012, p13. S3).

The findings contributed to an **increased practitioner awareness of the impact of domestic abuse on families** at CPD events for practitioners (S1) and in further studies (See for example Elmer, and Dijkstra, 2012; Elmer 2013, 2014 and Adhikari, Smith, Elmer, 2017, Elmer, 2019). (R5, R6, S1, S2, S5). The significance of impact can be seen in **changes to practice** in Leeds Children's Services. The route to emerging impact can also be traced in **the application of social justice to social care**, a developing area of practice in **post-modernist social work (R5, S2)** in which domestic abuse, can also explain **the marginalisation of adults in vulnerable contexts**.

Findings from this study were presented at a National Social Work Conference (London, 2011) (R2) and the **World Social Work Conference (Stockholm 2012)** at which 100+ international delegates representing practitioners and policy makers attended a symposium on the research (S5). A CPD workshop also took place at LTU for 100 regional practitioners to raise their awareness of domestic abuse, (2014).

The impact of a Family Group Conferences (FGC) pilot study (2009) **resulted in changes to Leeds City Council (LCC) policy and practice (S1)** including the **adoption of FGCs by LCC** as early intervention practice to promote **partnership work with families** and **giving a voice to children in decision making** concerning them. (R3, S1, S3).

Play based research methods were further developed for a study commissioned at LTU by Enterprise Educators UK, 2017 (S5). Participants recognised that their **symbolic representations may reveal deeper wisdom** and can help to identify **key insights to be worked on**, moving from the abstract and conceptual to the specific, concrete and actionable in their ideas (S5). This **research design** subsequently informed the development of **sand play training for community education and family support practitioners to improve children's engagement** and to provide **insights into the lived experiences of vulnerable children and young people (S1,2, S4)**. In continuing to develop **accessible and ethical research methods**, Elmer recognised that sand trays have the same potential as **both a therapeutic and pedagogic tool for vulnerable children in primary education settings (S1, S4)**. Sand play was developed as a **playful learning approach for adults and children** and disseminated at conference workshops (S5) and in CPD training for community educators (R6, S1, S3, S5). It is now **used in seven local primary schools** (part of Leeds City Council). Feedback from this training for community educators and family support practitioners includes:

"When we had a learning mentor we had a lot of these sessions and I observed some of them. They were very beneficial for the children and I was amazed at the results". (Head of a local primary school).

Play-based research approaches also enabled **learning disabled young care leavers to actively participate** in a study commissioned by **Action for Children, (2010)**. Findings have informed the development of independent living practice for Care Leavers. A **key insight for practitioners** concerned with preparing these young people for independent living, was their **high level of vulnerability to child sexual exploitation**. This **necessitated a change in practice** to ensure effective **Safeguarding** and **raise practitioner awareness of this as a potential outcome** and ensure that **practitioners gave young people a voice in leaving care planning (R2, S3)**.

Playful qualitative research processes were shared as **part of research and knowledge exchange** for the **British Association of Play Therapists (BAPT) (S1, S2, S5)**. As the knowledge exchange lead for BAPT, **Elmer has been able to promote research and knowledge exchange for practitioners (Elmer 2012, 2015)** and **this is recognised in the current BAPT Business Plan (2020) (S1, S5)**. **Engagement by BAPT play therapists themselves in knowledge exchange activities** is identifying how effective online play therapy is (necessitated by the pandemic), in terms of outcomes for children and families. **(S2, S5)**.

These studies are characterised by **engaging with hard to reach groups, enabling children, young people and adults in vulnerable contexts to find the means to articulate their views** about the education and social care services they may need. Evidence suggests that key features of these research studies are **developing research strategies that enable children and adults in vulnerable contexts to have a voice in services that directly affect their lives. (S1)**

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum 10 references)

S1 Testimonies from Horsforth Children's Services and British Association of Play Therapists (BAPT)

S2 Professional emails correspondence including Emeritus Professor Nick Frost (Leeds Beckett University)

S3 Reports

S4 Minutes: feedback on sand tray workshop for primary education and family support practitioners (2017- 2020)

S5 Conference presentations.