Summary of themes from the day

Sustaining and enhancing a culture of learning – how can we make this happen?

As part of this project a brief review of the literature relating to culture change, knowledge exchange, learning organisations, learning transfer and calls for change in child protection practice and culture was carried out. Below are some of the common themes from the review, these may help facilitate your discussions about how to sustain and enhance a culture of learning in your team, service or organisation going forward.

Common Themes

- Clarity of vision and purpose at all operational levels within each individual service is key, and related to this, the need for leaders who not only positively embrace the change required, but embody and demonstrate personal commitment to it.

- Leaders that model openness and reflection as well as nurture innovation are important for ensuring the organisation and staff are encouraged and supported to learn, change and develop. Informed decision making takes place best in a culture of learning.

- Managers and practitioners must make time to reflect on their role and consider how they can effect positive change, and what change will mean for people supported by services (such as children and their families)

- For knowledge to be shared it needs to be incorporated into existing continuous developmental activities, process and systems, such as appraisal and supervision.

- Interactive partnerships between universities/knowledge brokers (e.g. IRISS and topic specific development centres) and practice contexts can facilitate better communication and knowledge sharing. Good practice and opportunities for learning are inextricably linked.

- Facilitative approaches that give organisations and practitioners a range of supports to engage, understand, translate, test out and integrate knowledge into their local practice experience and contexts help create a culture of learning. Managers and practitioners need autonomy and professional authority to integrate new learning into individual and organisational practice.

- Transformational change requires whole systems thinking, an approach that galvanises the whole system within and across organisations, where the structures, cultures, systems, practices and strong leadership come together to create the conditions that enable professionals to make the best judgments using the evidence and their professional expertise to do ‘the right thing’.
There were 7 tables with a mix of people who had participated in the 3 strands of the project, the project team and invited guests from both local authorities.

Some of the recurring themes that came out of discussion are listed along with particular thoughts, suggestions and actions that came out of discussions

**Supporting good practice, reflection and shared learning**

The need for practitioners to feel safe and valued in order to learn, share and reflect was a recurring theme. Underpinning these comments was the importance and centrality of relationships, relationships with clients but also with team and organisational colleagues.

‘To reflect, share, learn and have genuinely curious conversations need to trust colleagues and feel safe, it is more than having ground rules, it is about having a sense of belonging, connection and solid relationships with colleagues and managers’.

There were various suggestions about how shared learning and reflection could be built into everyday working practices. Making time and space to share learning was a recurring theme. There was a suggestion that if practitioners could identify what they wanted to learn, that it was directly relevant to their practice and they did it in small but regular formats rather than one off events then it would be more sustainable. Reading groups, reflecting on cases, reviewing cases and articles were all suggestions.

Most of the groups felt that was scope to ‘forfeit one team meeting for one reflective/developmental meeting’. They felt this would help build a learning culture and more positively enhance both individual and team learning. Supervision was also seen a suitable forum for supporting reflection and shared learning. Some felt different forms of supervision, forms that were more developmental, would enhance both individual and team learning. Some suggested alternating individual sessions with group supervision sessions that that could incorporate feedback from training courses.

There were also singular comments about the need for social workers to take responsibility for their own learning and development, investing some of their own time to that enterprise. An example of that was that there were frontline practitioners doing research, they illustrated how learning can be enjoyed, they felt valued, educated and achieved sense of satisfaction, and this was a positive message.

Champions have their place but it is everyone’s business. If practitioners aren’t encouraged and supported to read, learn and become knowledgeable how can they be seen as experts by fellow professionals?

**Leadership and management**

The discussions raised the distinction between leadership and management and what managers and leaders needed to do to support a learning culture. There was mention made that leadership was seen as synonymous with management and that this was unhelpful, as opportunities were being missed. There was potential for leadership to be more distributed, if senior practitioners were given supported opportunities they too could take on some leadership responsibilities. However for this
to happen those in leadership and management roles need to have the confidence to allow others to lead.

A number of comments were made about the qualities required from managers and leaders if a learning culture was to be embraced and sustained. As well as having the confidence to allow others to lead, more openness was called for; more openness to learn from others and from mistakes, more openness to being challenged. It was felt leaders needed to be self aware and confident, the kind of leader others want to aspire to being, that they also needed learning and development space, so they too could show that they valued academic research and the links with practice. If they modelled that training and learning is part of your PRD, made space for supporting learning and reflection then a positive ethos of learning would be built up.

The latter comment about modelling seemed to come from a sense that managers say they support learning, say they give time and support to staff to reflect and that staff get training but they often don’t model it in practice. The intention is there but it is not really happening in practice.

It was felt that managers needed to be more tuned in to the learning support needs of practitioners, it is easy to assume that because practitioners are ‘just getting on with it and not complaining’ they don’t need support. It would be helpful if managers were more aware that some practitioners may not feel comfortable about asking for more time or feel if they ask for support it will be seen as them moaning. It would be helpful if managers asked about learning needs, asked about how they could support them before during and after training then the practitioner would feel valued and supported. These sentiments were echoed in some of the discussions around learning and development.

Learning and development

There were calls for a more strategic approach to learning. ‘Less training and more learning’, higher and clearer expectations around the need to share learning, to make it more integrated between the individual the team and the service. Managers have a key role in supporting the preparation for learning, supporting the learning both during and after it take places. This can be done through supervision, if it took more of a developmental form.

Learning and development staff also have a key role here. One group suggested that trainers could invite people to write a reflective piece during training, encourage them to learn on learning. They could also create opportunities to share learning through cafe style discussions, which potentially offer opportunities to come together with people from different teams/worlds, build on each other’s experience and learning.

It is also worth while recognising that although we occasionally have light bulb moments, learning is often cumulative, it takes time to process, it takes confidence and support to implement learning into practice and none of us can be expected to change overnight, learning is a change process and it take time.

Barriers
'Hot desks are not helpful', they lessen opportunities for informal support amongst peers, and they generate a feeling of not having a secure base and discourage practitioners from having books and material to refer to. The highly mobile way of working in open plan offices seems to run counter to many of the elements needed to develop a culture of reflection and shared learning. We will need to think hard about what a culture of learning looks like in this kind of office environment.

The connection between pay and PDP is not helpful. Neither are having high caseloads with lots of high tariff cases, the need to make time to reflect and review on these is great but the pressure of working on and managing these makes it really hard.

Academia and practice links

There were a number of groups who expressed a wish to continue to have links with the university. It was helpful to have 2 way conversations between academics and practice informing one another, and it would be good to sustain ways of doing this going forward.

Some wanted to retain access to university e resources or other quality resources from centres such as CRFR and IRISS

Could organisations create space on shared drive for research evidence? Can practitioners ask academics for pointers to research they would like to read? Some felt that they now felt more confident to make direct links with academics.

One individual said they were going to discussion the possibility to taking forward other ideas for research. Another was going to discussion possibilities about using the posters to share the learning further. Some of the practitioner researchers had plans to share their research with key people. One participant of the critical reflection groups was going to try and resurrect reflective group in one area.