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growing research in practice (GRIP) an innovative partnership model

NEIL LUNT, CHRISTA FOUCHÉ AND DEBORAH YATES

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Families Commission
Public Trust Building
Level 6, 117-125 Lambton Quay
PO Box 2839
Wellington 6140

Telephone: 04 917 7040
Email: enquiries@nzfamilies.org.nz
www.nzfamilies.org.nz

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GRIP Research Team

Neil Lunt

Christa Fouché

Deborah Yates (Project manager)

Glenda Light

Liz Beddoe

Phil Harington

GRIP Practice Teams

Auckland District Health Board – Auckland City Hospital

Auckland District Health Board – Epsom Day Unit

Bo-Ai-She

Family Works Northern – Te Hononga

North Shore Community and Social Services

SAFE

Shakti Family Settlement and Social Services

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

Growing Research in Practice (GRIP) was an innovative partnership programme which aimed to help develop a culture of enquiry among practitioners in social service agencies in Auckland by developing strategies and resources to strengthen research-mindedness and related activity. The programme ran for 15 months (January 2006-March 2007) and was overseen by a

project team (consisting of Massey University grant holders and University of Auckland partners) and a practitioner advisor (the 'critical friend'), and managed by a project manager.

GRIP worked with nine social service agencies to have them explore research questions of immediate concern to practitioners. While all the projects were ultimately about improving services to clients, particularly families, they took different approaches. Various research methodologies and methods were employed.

Description of agency	Focus of research	Research methodology
1. Community health agency delivering specialised services to women	Evaluating the impact of the use of a screening tool on professional staff	Analysis of administrative data
2. Community mental health support programme for Chinese	Evaluating the effectiveness of a non-Chinese programme for use with Chinese mental health consumers in New Zealand	Interviews and focus groups with mental health consumers, their families and mental health professionals
3. Community social service working with Māori families	Developing evaluation processes for family assessment and intervention	Focus groups with whānau
4. Early parenting support programme for Pacific families	Developing a Pacific social work practice model for families	Interviews and focus groups with staff
5. Hospital social workers	Developing a best-practice social work model for family meetings	Focus groups with social workers and hospital staff
6. Community agency working with male sex offenders	Investigating the reasons for failure to engage in or complete programmes	Data mining from files
7. Domestic violence agency working with migrants	Exploring factors impacting on participation by male clients in violence prevention programmes	Interviews with staff of agencies successfully recruiting men to domestic violence programmes
8. Council of social services	A stocktake of social services to assess need in a broad area	An online and paper questionnaire for social services agencies
9. Two agencies delivering prevention services to at-risk youth	Investigating the effectiveness of goal-setting in working with young people	Focus groups and interviews with participants in programmes

The GRIP programme and process

The intention of the GRIP programme was to explore ways to facilitate practitioners' research in various settings. The projects learnt from and were supported by experts, mentors and peers, and could benchmark their progress. A framework and timeline were established for the achievement of its outcomes.

Six workshops, spread over a year, allowed broad coverage of topics likely to be useful for the progress of the projects. Experts spoke on quantitative and qualitative methodologies, data collection, data analysis, presentation of results and cultural expertise. The workshops had multiple objectives: increasing general research knowledge; informing specific research; encouraging participants to meet and share experiences; and helping projects to set goals and benchmark their own progress.

The mentors included the GRIP research team members (with the exception of the critical friend) and a Māori cultural advisor. Mentors have met the teams regularly in the workplace, and communicated frequently with them by email.

Evaluation of GRIP processes

Little is known about what facilitates or promotes research by practitioners. GRIP sought to understand better how the uptake of research activity can be facilitated and the potential results of research disseminated amongst social work and community practitioners in organisational and practice settings. The research process included gathering and recording information from the project participants (mentors, practitioner teams, team contacts, project manager and critical friend) before, during and after the completion of the projects. Guidelines on supporting research in practice teams emerged from the data, the GRIP project as a whole and the literature.

Outcomes achieved

- > **Eight of the selected practice teams** conceptualised, designed, undertook and disseminated research during the project. Seven of them stayed with the GRIP programme until the end.
- > **A resource manual for practitioners** was compiled from the material used to mentor practice projects,

the workshops and insights gathered during the programme. 'A Collection of Resources' is available on the Massey University and University of Auckland websites. (Appendix one).

- > **A practitioner-research symposium** was held. Seven of the participant groups presented their research projects. The unedited research reports of the GRIP practice teams were collated as 'A Collection of Papers', which is available electronically on the Massey University and University of Auckland websites. (Appendix two).
- > **A 'knowledge map'** was drawn up, using research data and academic deliberation to assess the effectiveness of GRIP resources and strategies. This report is based on the knowledge map; other aspects will be debated in various publications and forums. The main conclusions are reported below.

Conclusions and recommendations

Practice projects:

- > The projects resulted in some significant suggestions to practice: to programme delivery (including changes to policy or funding), to recording processes and to thinking about practice areas. Ways of working with clients were changed or affirmed; and critical reflection about practice has raised further questions for potential research.
- > The small practice project helped practitioners learn about the research process and practice topics, enabled professional development and team communication and facilitated team learning and connections with others.
- > The main areas of benefit for agencies are practice awareness, ongoing practice research and enhanced relationships and networks.
- > A close team environment fosters motivation, organisational ability, research skills and presentation skills. It is difficult for practice teams to work across organisations and sites. Teams with members working shifts, part-time hours or as volunteers face additional barriers, although they are not insuperable.
- > One individual should be charged with keeping the project on track; custodianship is important in maintaining motivation and completing projects.

- > Group ownership, clear communication, openness, mutual trust and a commitment to inclusiveness in the team are needed for successful team practice research projects.
 - > Groups passionate about the practice focus of their projects or about research are more likely to maintain enthusiasm, and achieve individual and organisational benefits in the process.
- The organisational and professional context:**
- > Time management, forward planning and maintaining motivation can be managed effectively by providing a framework for practice projects, with a final deadline and project milestones.
 - > The role of the employing organisation is important in nurturing practitioner research. Organisations need to help build teams and encourage the networking of resources within agencies.
 - > Organisations need to institute procedures and require employees to engage in research-related activities.
 - > Systems to provide mentoring and learning opportunities need to be developed or negotiated through contracting or partnerships.
 - > The responsibility for developing practitioner research lies with various bodies, sectors, networks and fields of practice. Professional bodies, training institutions, social service agencies and influential individuals need to get decision-makers to value practice research initiatives and recognise their benefits.
 - > The responsibility for research must be shared between the practitioner, the organisation and other key stakeholders, including academics.

1. BACKGROUND

Debates about the appropriate relationship between social work and research are longstanding. They raise interrelated questions about social work: its aims and roles, its underpinning values; its knowledge base and the traditions and approaches to social inquiry, if any, that it should draw upon. These questions are recurring ones, posed in slightly different guises over successive decades (DePoy, Hartman and Haslett 1999; Greenwood, 1957; Kogan, 1963).

This initial section sets out the broader professional and research context to provide a backdrop to the GRIP project. The section explores relationships between practice and research, the current push for social work research, barriers to research activity and the current picture of practitioner research.

1.1 Relationships between practice and research

The 2001 International Federation of Social Workers suggests that the social work profession aims to “promote[s] social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being” (Hare, 2005). At the core of social work’s mission are the values of social justice and commitment to social change.

Social work seeks to harness resources to build capacity in families and communities to solve problems and develop coping abilities and resilience (Walton, 2005). It works with individuals to secure resources and build relationships within families and communities. At the local and national levels, social work helps ensure that policies and organisations are responsive to, and provide resources for, the diverse communities they serve. Two threads therefore run through social work practice. The first, social work as direct practice, involves assessing individuals, groups and families, obtaining material resources and offering psychotherapeutic counselling and relationship-building interventions. The second is community development practice and social work, including programme development and advocacy (Hare, 2005; MacDonald, 1998; McDonald, 2003; Nash, 1998).

There has been a longstanding debate as to whether social work is an art or a science, and whether its activities should be guided by social research activity

and, if so, by which sorts (Trevillion, 2000). From the 1960s the ‘empirical practice movement’ in American social work emphasised the scientific basis for practice intervention, focusing on effective policies and programmes, and on practitioners utilising self-intervention assessment (Reid, 1994). The favoured methodologies were quantitative, and research studies were expected to provide stocks of knowledge on effective programmes, the results of which could be shared amongst practitioners and managers, and captured in practice guidelines (Kirk, 1999; Sheldon, 1986).

There was disillusionment that empirical practice failed to provide unambiguous information as to the more effective interventions. As a result, single-case design, which drew from the casework tradition of social work, began to gain favour (Fischer, 1973; Reid, 2002). Single-system design focused on the individual client’s case, stressing the establishment of baselines, structured observations and client reports. The hope was that such clinical evaluation would be able to “offer clear measures of effectiveness of a particular intervention on a particular client problem” (Dillenburg, 1998, p.75; Reid, 1994). As Epstein (1996) notes, this hope persists into the present, particularly in the United States; practitioners are encouraged to track ‘cause-effect relationships between intervention and outcomes’ using standardised, mainly quantitative measurement. Critics consider that its focus on ends rather than means fails to account for process factors that mediate and impact on outcomes, including ‘helping relationships’ (Smith, 2002).

More recently the potential contribution of systematic evidence to clinical decision-making has been on the agenda, under the influence of the evidence-based movement. Evidence-based practice is defined as “the conscientious, explicit and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions about the care of individual [clients]” (Sackett, Rosenberg, Gray, Haynes and Richardson 1996, p.72).

Evidence-based clinical practice stresses the role of experimental designs, the gold standard of randomised control trials and the systematic review of evidence to inform practice. As a process, evidence-based practice involves:

1. Having a research question (ie: a question that is driven by client need)

2. Engaging in a systematic review of existing evidence and search databases
3. Assessing evidence
4. Considering the results with a client
5. Drawing conclusions and intervening appropriately (Gambrill, 2003a, p.7; Gilgun, 2005).

Evidence-based practice prizes quantitative or, at the very least, measurable data (Epstein, 1996; Seligman, 1995). It has been suggested that social workers engaged in evidence-based practice will be merely users or followers of guidelines (Proctor, 2004, cited in Mullen, Schlonsky, Bledsoe and Bellamy, 2005).

In the field of social work, as in other human services, opinions are divided about the value and feasibility of evidence-based practice. For some, its emphasis on transparency and its democratising of practice-related research findings offer a welcome challenge from social work as an authority-based profession (Gambrill, 2001; Gambrill, 2003b; MacDonald, 1998; McDonald, 2003; O'Connor, 2000; Sheldon, 2001). Such writers suggest that evidence-based practice appeals for reasons of professional ethics, efficiency and client focus. Whilst such practice may not point unequivocally to what works, it may ensure that ineffective and dangerous practices are weeded out (Witkin and Harrison, 2001).

1.2 Collaborative and grass-root models of enquiry

In the last 20 years there have been a number of challenges to traditional research approaches and dominant research methodologies, including quantitative empirical, single-case and evidence-based practice. They have included the development of action research, collaborative and partnership models, practitioner research and reflexive practitioner-based enquiry (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1999). Previous models of research took the view that knowledge is formulated by external 'experts' and that knowledge and policy are disseminated downwards through a hierarchy (Dirkx, 2006). The emerging approaches, by contrast, share a willingness to challenge more traditional concepts of expertise, research processes, and ownership. They also share a commitment to change on the basis of findings. The diverse approaches go beyond paradigm wars and debates

over methods or mechanisms for bridging research-practice gaps. Rather, they are about the values underpinning research activities, the role of power and the contestable nature of knowledge itself.

In the field of social work, a consistent thread has been the need for new expertise that challenges traditional hierarchical relationships between the researcher and the researched, and that gives both social workers and clients the opportunity to solve problems (Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2005). This thread has been reflected in discussions about the potential of action research and participatory action research in social work settings (Bond and Hart, 1995; Healy, 2001) as a form of multidisciplinary knowledge generation and stakeholder-centred organisational change. In treating knowledge as power, the line between research and social actions disappears. These attempts at partnership and collaborative research are often facilitated by academic interests working with clients and communities on topics of mutual interest.

At the micro level, practitioner research activities reflect distrust and unease about the previous ways research has been tackled. In contrast with traditional research, practitioner research has practitioners begin their own developments, moving beyond knowledge-transfer to knowledge creation (Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2005). These developments are not simply notions with applicability to social work or workers but are specifically practitioner-focused, emerging from the needs of practice.

These developments are mirrored in various professional groupings and are not confined to social work (Shaw, 2005). There are discussions about practitioner reflection and practice wisdom, fostering research-mindedness and research literacy, and small-scale practitioner research. The practitioner-researcher movement has had longstanding currency in teaching (Cochran-Smith, 2005; Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1999) and emerged from several distinct pressures: the need for professional development; the call for empowerment of citizens; and a university-instigated push.

Patterson, Santa, Short and Smith, (Eds.) (1993) state that "Professionals are full participants in the structure and conduct of their work and teacher research is a sign of professionalism" (p.4). A number of writers assert that good teaching practice requires participation

in research because of the importance of reflection, and to use the data sources that teachers encounter as part of their everyday work (Burnaford, Fischer and Hobson (Eds.), 2001; Norlander-Case, Reagan and Case, 1999). The influence of Donald Schön has been evident in debates about practitioner research and reflection. Methods such as reflective practice, journaling and mind-mapping are used, as well as more traditional social research methods such as interviews, case files, observations and surveys (Burnaford, 2001; Fischer, 2001; Meyers and Rust, 2003; Schwalbach, 2003).

Others (such as Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1999) argue that teacher research must be systematic, intentional, self-critical inquiry; they exclude reflection and any ways of working that are not systematic and intentional. Nevertheless, teaching has had a strong line of action research from the 1950s, drawing on the work of Lewin (Hobson, 2001), focusing on the classroom and emphasising innovation, and bottom-up theory building (Fischer, 2001), utilising the range of empirical techniques.

In nursing, the role of the nurse researcher has been advocated and debated in recent decades. Again, there is emphasis on reflection to bring together practice interventions, theory development and good patient care (Bennett, 2002; Bulman and Schutz, 2004; Johns, 2004). Making nurses better consumers of research findings has been the subject of a strong line of debate in the literature. There are also discussions about the role of nurses as researchers in various health settings (Lacey, 2006). There is a key issue of establishing a research culture which “can be considered to exist when the environment within which people operate leads them to accept the research process as a valid, valued and, in fact integral part of their professional practice and that of others with whom they work” (Wibberley and Dack, 2002, p.109). Clarke and Procter (1999) argue for reflexive forms of research, such as action research and practitioner research, which do not dissociate research and practice. Their own work focused on developing a culture of ownership.

Debates within social work have been influenced by, and often paralleled, developments in these fields. Here we distinguish three overlapping concepts that have developed in the professional literatures and

are pertinent to developments in social work: the reflective practitioner; research-mindedness; and practitioner research.

1.2.1 Reflective practitioner

Schön (1983) identifies the reflective practitioner as one whose practice is accompanied by ‘thinking in action’, as opposed to the academic commentator who takes abstract or theoretical concepts and then applies them to particular situations.

When someone reflects in action he becomes a researcher in the potential context. He is not dependent on the categories of established theory and techniques but constructs a new theory of this ‘unique case’ (Schön, 1983, p.68).

The notion of reflective practice has had major influences in teaching (Patterson et al, 1993; Cochran-Smith, 2005; Donoghue, Tassell and Patterson, 1996). In reflexive practitioner enquiry, research is carried out by the practitioner in the working environment, and knowledge is developed from the personal experience and expertise of practitioners and service users.

Reflexive practitioner-based enquiry has had a much slower uptake in social work, but is part of the growing emphasis on the production of knowledge. Whereas once academics and ‘professionals’ were seen as experts, now the expertise is perceived to be “contained in the personal experience” (Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2005, p.264) and efforts are made to value and validate practice-based experience and wisdom. Fook (1996, 2003) proposes the concept of theorising from practice, which involves developing practice theory, and seeking to integrate practice, theory and research into specific practice. In essence it is a ‘rebalancing’ of rational ways of knowing (Fook, 1996, p.198) and a recognition of “professional artistry” (Schön, 1983, p.49). Papell and Skolnik (1992) observe that approaching professional activity and education as ‘reflection-in-action’ arises from an epistemology of practice and a decision to emphasise the unique case, intuition and artistry.

Riemann thinks that such a critical and self-critical discourse, which addresses professional issues in general as well as the individual practitioner’s experiences and reflections, can advance the collective development of social work and inter-professional relationships (Riemann, 2005).

1.2.2 Research-mindedness

A second major area of emphasis is research-mindedness and research literacy. This approach considers practitioners both as the targets of findings and as active participants in the uptake and use of research findings and their incorporation into decision-making. However, there is debate over the precise understanding of research-mindedness. For Fuller and Petch (1995), this approach involves making practitioners more research-literate, while Karvinen-Niinikoski (2005) advocates the British emphasis on disseminating research-based knowledge generally downwards through a hierarchy. For Everitt, Hardiker, P., Littlewood, J. and Mullender, A., (1992, p.4) research-mindedness concerns the analytical assessment of social need and resources, and the development, implementation and evaluation of strategies to meet that need.

Towards the end of the 1990s, the Department of Health in England and Wales emphasised that social care practitioners should be more research-minded (cited in Barratt, 2003). But the desirable processes for effectively sharing findings and ensuring the uptake and implementation are far from clear. There is good reason to be cautious about the accessibility of information and the ability of practitioners to keep up to date with findings (Rosen A., Proctor, E.K., and Staudt, M.M. 1999). Indeed, in Sheldon and Chilvers' 2000 study, 18 percent of the 2,285 social workers surveyed had read no practice-related material in the previous six months. Lack of internet access and library facilities has been identified as an obstacle to such reading, although team environments offer potential for change and for organisational learning (Barratt, 2003).

Even if arguments in favour of research-mindedness are accepted, questions remain about the value of what is read by practitioners, and whether the stocks of knowledge and the articles and findings that are produced dovetail with the needs of practice. Fook (2003) in a search of *Australian Social Work* articles 1990–2000 notes that 60 percent were written by academics and 30 percent by practitioners, and 10 percent were jointly authored. The studies surveyed fell into three types – empirical research, practice development and practice wisdom. Locally, examples of research reported by practitioners are available in the Association of Social Workers' (ANZASW) publication *Social Work Review* and the Child Youth and Family

Service's *Social Work Now*, but they are limited. Taking the recent issues of *Social Work Review*, there are a few excellent articles by academics on practice and research issues (Benseman, 2006; Mafile'O, 2006; Matai'a, 2006; and O'Donoghue et al, 2006; for example) and by practitioners about practice or practice models (Aiono, 2006; Talaimanu, 2006). Inspiring reflections and critical analysis of aspects of practice are sometimes included (Milner, 2006; Stanley, 2006), but there are very few articles by practitioners reporting on research they have undertaken and discussing the methodology employed. Those included are typically isolated examples that do not draw upon organisational initiatives (Garland and Ellis, 2006; Knox and Byrt, 1998; Tan and Simmonds, 1998). The authorship of such articles is also worth mentioning. From a total of 16 articles in the Spring and Autumn 2006 issues of the *Social Work Review* journal, 10 articles were published by academics (including Benseman, 2006; Cooper, 2006; Henrickson, 2006; Mafile'O, 2006; Matai'a, 2006; O'Donoghue et al, 2006 and Zubrzycki, 2006) and five by practitioners (including Aiono, 2006; Garland and Ellis, 2006; Milner, 2006; Talaimanu, 2006). Of the practitioners, the last two have worked in academia before publishing the article. One article was a joint publication by an academic and practitioner (Staniforth and Larkin, 2006). It can be argued that practitioners are the best judges of what information is required, and that they also have insight into conducting certain types of inquiry.

1.2.3 Practitioner research

A practitioner or group of practitioners may carry out their own enquiry in order to understand their own practice and their particular service users better, and to improve the services they are offering. While their study may be small and localised, it has the potential to be shared with others in similar environments and improved on through dialogue and networking. In publishing and responding to publications in this way, practitioners are said to be actively exercising their professionalism and taking responsibility for the quality of their work (Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2005; Riemann, 2005). For some the ideal is a researching practitioner contributing to the production of innovative knowledge (Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2005). Recognising practitioner study is problematic, as clear definitions are elusive (Shaw, 2005). Such activities clearly overlap with practitioners' reflection and with elements of research-

mindedness understood as dissemination. The most it is possible to do is signal the broad contours of a practice research terrain.

Some identify a form of practitioner research focused on rectifying the limitations of single-system case design. Greenwood and Lowenthal (2005) say that practitioner research reacts against the dominance of scientific case design, and serves to stress the importance of description, and tacit knowledge. Such approaches can then incorporate knowledge reflecting the complexity of real practice situations. Similarly, Gilgun (1994) suggests the importance of understanding situations in context, using 'thick description' and case studies incorporating quantitative and qualitative insights and with a central focus on process. This approach might, for example, help understand not only that a single intervention worked or did not work, but why it did; and it could incorporate a contextual outline for others seeking to use results.

Others suggest that practitioner research can accommodate empirical activity that is not restricted to a single case but is more expansive and eclectic. Shaw (2005) recognises the difficulties of defining practitioner research in methodological and epistemological terms; his grounded definition suggests that what is routinely recognised as practitioner research includes the following dimensions: direct collection or reflection on existing data; aims set by professionals; practical or immediate benefits; hands-on collection of data in their own practice or that of peers; and time-limited and small-scale studies. There is room for diversity as regards topic, design and methodology. The drive and context for practitioner research may come from the requirements of tertiary study, an agency imperative or practitioners themselves (Shaw, 2005).

The potential of these ideas for social work is demonstrated by Fuller and Petch (1995) in their four-year exploration of practitioner research. They do not associate any particular style of research with the research practitioner, the choice of methodology and methods being constrained only by the agency context or the researcher's own limitations (Fawcett, 2000; Gibbs, 2000; Shaw, 2005). They also believe practitioners are often better placed than academic researchers to develop collaborative relationships with professionals and service users. This model of the practitioner-researcher has the potential to strengthen the social work profession (Fuller and Petch, 1995),

moving beyond a literature shaped by academics and social workers studying for qualifications, towards research as a routine part of professional practice.

Fuller and Petch list a series of advantages of practitioner research (1995, p.10), including a research agenda driven by knowledge of the context and service-users' needs (see also Burnette, Morrow-Howell, and Chen 2003). They can also draw upon, and in the process recognise the value of, practice skills such as identifying problems and devising solutions as they do the research, whilst considering the dynamic context. Interviewing and recording skills and the ability to develop rapport are also highly useful (Atkinson, 2005; Gilgun, 1994). Further advantages of practitioners undertaking research include their knowledge of the way agencies collect data, and its robustness. Indeed some see the issue as not the similarities of social work to research but the way research emulates social work (Atkinson, 2005).

On the other hand, there are questions about the ability of practitioners to critique their own definitions and ways of working; their lack of experience in formulating research questions, and lesser focus on direct process; and their ability to balance competing accountabilities to clients, their teams and organisations, and the wider profession (Fuller and Petch, 1995, p.11). Shaw (2003a) notes that the quality of some practitioner research is variable, and says that the overall quality needs to be raised.

A number of writers have suggested models and frameworks for practitioners working at the micro or meso levels (Epstein, 2001; Fawcett, 2000; Gibbs, 2000; Small and Uttal, 2005). They have put forward notions such as 'The Practitioner-Evaluator' (Everitt et al, 1992); 'Critical Action Research' models (De Poy et al, 1999); data mining and practice-based research (Epstein, 2001); action-oriented research (Small and Uttal, 2005); 'Practitioner Evaluation' (Gibbs, 2000); and research-focused practitioners (Joubert, 2006).

1.3 Push for social work research

There is a growing international agenda for a closer relationship between social work and research. The conditions and agenda for social work research are changing, and there are advocates for reflective practice, evaluation, evidence-based practice, participatory action research and collaborative research

(De Poy and Gilson, 2003; Dominelli, 2005; Gibbs, 2001; Powell, 2002). There is in effect a mosaic of social work and research, with social workers seen as either consumers or producers of research, and potentially as owners or assistants in knowledge creation (Dudley, 2005).

There is no single understanding of social work research, or of practitioner research (Shaw, 2005). Trends in individual countries are influenced by organisational culture, education and funding. In the United States, for example, the scientific practitioner movement, with single-system design and underpinned by rationalistic and positivist leanings, has held more sway. Despite its laudable aims, single-system design has been difficult to realise and has brought ethical challenges (Epstein, 1996). The British research tradition has been more pragmatic and included qualitative and narrative developments, action research and evidence-based practice. Evidence-based social work has been the focus of a number of initiatives (such as the Centre for Evidence-Based Social Services and the Social Care Institute for Excellence). Whilst New Zealand is subject to the broad global pressures in favour of expanding the role of social work, there are also distinctly local conditions that sometimes constrain and sometimes provide opportunities for the development of research.

1.3.1 Context of registration and professionalism

The involvement of social workers in conducting and using research can be seen as part of a move to 'get their house in order', and as such it aligns with developments such as the introduction of the Social Worker Registration Act (2003). There is a recognition of the relatively low standing of the social work profession compared with the medical professions for example (Fuller and Petch, 1995), which is due in part to the failure to develop a social work equivalent to the tradition of clinical research. Throughout its history social work has had to push for acceptance and a market share, and evidence-based practice is also part of the emergent professional project (McDonald, 2003; Witkin and Harrison, 2001).

Not all social workers in New Zealand hold a recognised social work qualification. An increased emphasis on social work qualifications has been accompanied by pressure to include research components in professional preparation. This might introduce social work students to ideas about the role and value of

research. The use and conduct of research can be seen as an important part of social workers' own ethics, and the training curriculum needs to respond accordingly (Fook, 2003). The code of ethical conduct (1993) of the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW) includes research among the ethical responsibilities of social workers, and hence in the professional role. The relatively low scores of social work departments in research assessment exercises, both locally and internationally (Gibbs, 2001; Lyons, 2000; Shaw, 2003b), have also served to encourage interest in increasing the quantity and quality of social work research in academic settings.

1.3.2 Wider accountability agendas

Research has been promoted as providing a basis for ensuring wider accountability – to users, funders and the public. Social work has been subject to the social critique of expertise that has been felt by most professions in recent decades, and the media has been vociferous in pointing out perceived failings of social work in New Zealand and elsewhere (Gambrill, 2003b). Users have led calls for more accountability on the part of social workers and voice for themselves, and demands to work in partnership with professionals. Understanding the needs and aspirations of these user groups will in itself require research activity to reflect on current provision, to understand how outcomes are being shaped and defined and to analyse the gaps in provision. Indigenous challenges to mainstream social service provision have also required social workers and their organisations to reflect on the work they do and the appropriateness of their interventions. Responding to diverse and changing New Zealand populations and contemporary social challenges will also require research and intervention (Statistics New Zealand, 2006).

The Government is setting new requirements for social policy, focused on managerial expectations, outcomes, and value for money (Crisp, 2000; Gibbs, 2001; O'Brien, 1999). Social services need research to promote efficiency, to set priorities and to adapt to changing needs (Anderson, 1999). The push to improve the delivery of social services and to focus on outcomes has brought an emphasis on evaluating programmes and improving intervention logic (State Service Commission, 1999; State Services Commission/ The Treasury, 2003).

Charitable funders in the market for services delivery are also imposing similar expectations on their funded

agencies, and government contracts require openness to monitoring and evaluation. Reasonable questions for social work may now include:

- > How does the intervention help clients?
- > What are the local needs?
- > How can you improve practice?
- > How do you respond to clients' diversity?
- > Can you show that the programme merits continued funding?

Of course, these shifts are not restricted to New Zealand, and they are in many ways part of a broader pattern of global developments and global forces. This includes a policy emphasis on what works, the revolution in technology and information retrieval, and challenges to experts and their knowledge systems.

Alongside calls for research by social workers, there are still calls for work about social work, including evaluations of government initiatives and contributions to the theory of the discipline. A growing interest in research by practitioners does not negate such developments, and practitioner activity itself exhibits considerable diversity and innovation (Gibbs, 2001; Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2005). This practitioner landscape includes research by social workers (Kanuha, 2000; Shaw, 2005), some who view social work practice as research in itself (De Poy and Gilson, 2003), and even some who argue that in many instances research is social work (Atkinson, 2005). It is these various forms of practitioner research that GRIP is concerned with.

1.4 Barriers to research

There remain numerous barriers to the conduct and use of research. They can be categorised as resource, professional identity, organisational system and cultural constraints.

1.4.1 Resources

The demands placed on practitioners' time and 'permanently expanding caseloads' (Fuller and Petch, 1995) are major barriers to social workers undertaking research (Fook, 2003; Fuller and Petch, 1995; Sidell et al, 1996). Time is a particular problem for social workers and negotiation with management is required to fit research in with caseloads.

There is also a lack of research expertise. There are few post graduate courses focused on social work research, and most are not made relevant to practice or to practitioner research. Few publications are focused on practitioner research; and it is the distance from practice, and the mimicry of scientism, that gives much research activity its credibility. There is also concern about the ability to use potential support as and when it is required (McCrae, Murray, Huxley and Evans 2005).

The lack of skills is compounded by an aspiration amongst those attempting to stimulate practitioner research that it should not be simply collation of information or description. As Shaw (2005) asks, "does research by practitioners have the potential to be a source of *critical* practice in social work and other professions?" (p.1231, italics added).

1.4.2 Professional identity

The ways in which practitioners view their professional role and focus may make them reluctant to engage in research. Practitioners often ask how research knowledge fits with other sorts of knowledge. "Social workers use a wide range of sources of knowledge, including our intuition or inner voice; what seems logical; experiences of our past; our parents and others in authoritative roles; the expertise of supervisors, teachers, and others; and the policies of respected professional organisation" (Dudley, 2005, p.3; Klein and Bloom, 1995). When they are engaged in research, there is also always the prospect that it will be downgraded by the practitioners themselves and put aside for more short-term work demands.

Some practitioners may regard certain sorts of research activity, such as single-case design, as intrusive. As Epstein (1996) concludes, the requirements of rigorous studies on individual clients may "directly conflict with the professional culture and values of social work" and "the practice norms of most practitioners". Self-image may also act as a barrier, with social workers viewing themselves as helpers rather than intellectuals; and such a view may be promulgated within multidisciplinary organisations.

1.4.3 Organisational system and culture

The nature and size of social work organisations acts as a further barrier to practitioners undertaking research. Their workforce is diverse, and this may sometimes work against collaborative working and sharing. There

are issues of scale, as social workers are often based in small, isolated agencies. Lack of moral support is often seen as a barrier to research, as social work is regarded as lonely and unpredictable work. Ensuring access to peer support and conversation with those who are experiencing similar issues is a possible solution, but it may be difficult to achieve in small organisations that lack the depth and range of skills. In attempts to build partnerships there are also potential culture clashes between academic schools of social work and practice agencies. The academic emphasis on theory-building and publishing in academic journals may crowd out the practical priorities of agencies, or vice versa.

Other professions are likely to experience similar barriers. Factors that constrain nurses from research participation include lack of time, lack of peer support and limited knowledge and skills (Roxburgh, 2006; Watson, Clarke, Swallow and Forster 2005). Barriers to the transfer of evidence-based knowledge include the need for skills, compatibility of format and time. Barriers are organisational, educational and practice-related regardless of whether what is at stake is the conduct of research (Watson et al, 2005) or its utilisation (Thompson, McCaughan, Cullum, Sheldon and Raynor 2005). Farmer and Weston (2002) assert the importance of bottom-up, top-down and whole system leadership in health systems, and stress the importance of recognising barriers in order to build collaborative relationships to deal with them. In teaching, again, the barriers are familiar ones: time, support and expertise amongst others (Burnaford, 2001).

1.5 Partnerships and practitioner research

One of the major themes in the research literature on practitioner research in recent decades is the importance of partnership and collaboration in the planning and conduct of research. These partnerships are potentially three fold. First, they include partnerships between academic researchers and front-end service users, which involve expectations about control by and empowering of service users (Beresford, 2005; Hanley, 2005; Lowes and Hulatt, 2005). Debates about these topics have arisen from the push to make services more responsive to those who use them, and related challenges to the relations of research production.

Second, a less developed form of research partnership involves practitioners and service users. Allen-Meares, Hudgins, Engberg and Lessnau (2005) note that social work researchers are emphasising collaboration, while advocates of action research (Alston and Bowles, 1998; Bond and Hart, 1995) emphasise changes in practice and also acknowledge the importance of ethics and involvement. Shaw (2005) notes some deficiencies within practitioner research regarding its levels of user involvement. In most practitioner research, the absence of input by service users reflects an implicit view that practitioners' expertise need not be contested by services users (Shaw, 2005). The result is that social justice issues and the development and delivery of services are less likely to progress. In a similar vein, McCrae et al (2005) note, "Despite their empowerment ethic, there was little evidence of social workers actively working with service users and representative groups to plan or conduct research" (p.66).

A third form of partnership is that between academics and practitioners. Research findings must be presented in a form that will be read, and input by practitioners on research design, ethics and process would need to be fostered. There is a growing emphasis in research on more far-reaching partnerships and collaborations, and there are clearly many shapes partnerships can take. This debate traverses teaching (Burnaford, 2001; Cochran-Smith, 2005; Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1999); nursing (Lacey, 2006); and social work (D'Cruz and Gillingham, 2005; Fuller and Petch, 1995; Galinsky, Turnbull, Meglin, and Wilner 1993; Joubert, 2006). It involves practitioners becoming involved in the practice of research through a proactive development of partnerships by academics. Such partnerships cover the research process from the beginning through to the completion of projects and the dissemination of results. As Soyden (2002) notes, some aspects of such partnering are covered in more detail than others, and practitioner-researcher partnerships are often neglected at the problem-formulation stage. Fisher (2002) calls for social work research to include more empirical descriptions of problem formulation in researcher-practice partnerships, an essential but little understood aspect of generating research.

There is an ongoing discussion of the appropriate relationship of social work and research and indeed the best research model to follow. In moving from the realms of the textbook or academic journal there is

always the danger that rhetoric about research practice far outruns the reality, as Mullen et al (2005) note:

The social work profession, then, is in danger of thinking that, because we are defining, writing about, and teaching evidence-based practice, it really exists in the field. The profession has gone down this path in the past, defining, writing about, and teaching such innovations as empirically-based practice, the scientist-practitioner model of practice, and single-subject research methods, fully

expecting students to apply these methods in their future practice. Only later was it learned that these teachings were not transferring into practice in any substantial way (p.63).

Learning from this, we hoped to develop an initiative informed wherever possible by previous developments whilst being open to innovation, which retained a grass-roots perspective and was enmeshed in the organisational realities of practice. That initiative was Growing Research in Practice.

2. BACKGROUND TO GRIP

The purpose of this section is to outline the emergence of GRIP and the core aspects of its development. This section explores the evidence-based practice workshops which were a precursor to GRIP, the introduction of an innovative practice research partnership model, funding, and partnerships.

2.1 Evidence-based practice workshops

“In the real, messy, complex world of social care, with competing priorities and severe demands upon time and resources, getting research into practice can be challenging” (Moseley and Tierney, 2005, p.114). But it is clear from the growing literature on evidential practices in the social services, as outlined above, that there is a real need to continue to encourage practitioner research. The reasons for this may be diverse, but as Corby (2006, p.5) asserts, a research-informed practitioner is better equipped to deal with many problems and issues than one who is not. The core question for practitioners and researchers who passionately seek change is how best to facilitate and encourage it. Over the past 40 to 50 years there have been many attempts, and certainly enormous progress internationally (Kirk and Reid, 2002), but common challenges remain.

In an attempt to address obstacles to practitioner research in the New Zealand context, the principal instigators of this programme organised workshops in 2004 at Massey University (Albany), funded by the Ministry of Social Development’s Social Policy Evaluation and Research (SPEaR) Linkages programme. These workshops sought to highlight issues regarding evidence and practice for social workers and agencies, to develop a dialogue on research in practice and to establish networks involving social work professionals, educators and researchers.

2.1.1 First SPEaR workshop

The purpose of the first workshop in April 2004 was to begin dialogue on research in practice with social work professionals from a range of practice fields. Key aims were to facilitate small-group discussions, to ensure that formal and informal networking identified the barriers to the effective use of research in practice, and to move towards establishing potential research

agendas and research mechanisms. Speakers talked about the context for discussions of evidence-based social work practice, experiences of the use of evidence in practice and myths about social research and how they block good practice research.

The group discussion established possibilities and principles for developing research culture:

- > encouraging curiosity about practice
- > ensuring that practitioners had time to consider and use research resources
- > removing resistance
- > amplifying successes in practice and publicising them
- > starting small
- > making better use of administrative data already collected
- > using existing research to better effect.

Various concrete, practical suggestions emerged in group discussions:

- > creating research-focused networks
- > multi-agency activities (with smaller agencies pooling resources to address questions of mutual interest)
- > that academic institutions should consider themselves brokers of research linkages and usage
- > a website to raise the profile of evidence-based issues.

The barriers that were most often mentioned were lack of time and resources on the one hand, and managerial ambivalence and organisational resistance on the other. This is consistent with the literature (Clarke and Procter, 1999; Corby, 2006; Fawcett, 2000) on the impact of the environment in which social workers operate. Practitioners are “...just too busy because of intensive workloads, the bureaucratic demands of various new procedures and the crisis nature of much of their work” (Corby, 2006, p.162). Furthermore, social workers are required to evaluate their practice and face increasing pressures to demonstrate their accountability and its effectiveness (Corby, 2006). However, research into ways of working in a team or examining how a new initiative is operating are not seen as part of the job description (Fawcett, 2000, p.37) and are in fact at times seen as additional to normal work

(Clarke and Procter, 1999). While some social workers are uncomfortable with research methods and tend to avoid them, others feel they do not have the time to invest in both serving their clients and producing quality research (Sidell et al, 1996).

The ability to sell the benefits of research-based activity to managers and colleagues was seen as crucial to the success of research-based activity. Strategies for doing so were needed, as there was a perceived lack of institutional support and access to basic resources such as existing research data and technology. Moseley and Tierney (2005) report poor access to the internet in social service departments and limited provision of research databases, journals and books; and Barratt (2003, p.143) says that many social care agencies fail to help staff to access and use research in their day-to-day work. Suggested solutions included opportunities for agencies to form research partnerships, the development of a research culture and the incorporation of the contributions of practitioners, students and academics. A strong message from the workshop was the importance of 'communication, culture, consultation and collaboration' in integrating evidence-based activities into practice. Corby (2006, p.160) offers a model of organisational excellence in which organisations actively promote and encourage a research-based culture among frontline practitioners, and provide a supportive environment.

Feedback from the small groups helped shape the agenda for the second workshop. Various knowledge needs were suggested, some centred on individual practitioners and some at an agency level. It was recognised that a useful first step had been taken in highlighting these issues in an open forum. The challenge was to continue the dialogue and create and share problem-solving strategies.

2.1.2 Second SPEaR workshop

The second of the two workshops took place in June 2004, again at Massey University's Albany Campus. Key people and organisations were invited to contribute to discussions. The general manager of Special Education at the Ministry of Education spoke about 'Practice Applications' of evidence-based practice. Drawing together research from mental health and special education, she gave two detailed research examples to suggest opportunities and strategies for fostering research and service development. A social

work practitioner outlined two small-scale research-practice interventions, illustrating the potential for social workers to improve and influence service development through their everyday practice activities. A senior constable in the New Zealand Police explained how research and evaluation of youth crime prevention pilot programmes had been central to the continued funding and expansion of these activities.

Small group discussions proposed practical strategies, and clarified the potential role of tertiary institutions. Feedback from the small groups indicated a desire to continue the dialogue beyond the seminar. In the group discussions, various proposals and considerations emerged for the development of research-informed activities:

- > Discussion of evidence-based activity by practitioners, organisations and agencies offers the opportunity to reflect on and critique practice.
- > The client's point of view should be made central.
- > Agencies must ensure that groups of Māori and Pacific people (both clients and practitioners) are not 'burnt out' with the process of consultation to build evidence and tailor services delivery.
- > Incorporating evidence should be part of everyday practice, and it should be used to build and deliver consumer-oriented services.
- > Practitioners should see research as a core practical task – a constituent of the cycle of reflection, learning and doing.
- > Organisations and agencies should encourage looking across organisations and agencies for evidence.
- > Leadership is needed in organisations to facilitate a research culture.
- > Informal practitioner networks that meet regularly may be important.
- > Discussion of research and evidence must always be kept accessible and scientific jargon avoided.
- > Efforts should start small, and be flexible as to how research is written up and shared.
- > It should be recognised that practice changes for many reasons.

The key suggestions were later to be incorporated into the Innovative Practice Model. Participants also

outlined the role of tertiary institutions and their various resources in some detail. They focused on the potential of university students on placement in their organisations, the role of academic expertise and universities' ability to foster dialogue and collaborative working, and to disseminate research findings. Students were seen as a key resource for developing evidence-based activity in organisations. Students on placement bring current knowledge and ask questions that may help organisations continually critique their own practice. Students may also be involved in assembling and reviewing existing evidence or collecting new evidence, such as consumers' views. It was recognised that recent graduates are an important conduit between existing practice and new bodies of theory and knowledge.

A key message was that tertiary institutions should offer expertise in research design and opportunities to mentor practitioners. A clearly defined partnership is needed between tertiary and social service organisations when collaboration is pursued. The belief was that academics should continue to promote a culture of research and the value of evidence.

A strong theme was the desirability of forums bringing together aligned services to facilitate discussion of good practice and determine the gaps in particular service areas or fields of practice. Such forums should allow the updating and sharing of knowledge, and may involve facilitating relationships across the statutory and not-for-profit sectors. Institutions may gather and share research, perhaps moving to compiling practice base-lines, or operating as clearing houses for research studies.

2.1.3 Next steps

The view was expressed at both workshops that it was vital to continue to discuss evidence-based activity. Participants endorsed the suggestion of a brief electronic newsletter to incubate the interest that had been achieved thus far. The Evidence (North) e-newsletter was created to foster information sharing and discussion of research, social work and social services in the Auckland region, and three issues were circulated in the next 12 months. Many discussions followed on nurturing the dialogue and on working together on evidence-based practice activities.

Developing students as a resource for evidence-based activity in organisations was seen as a strategy that needed to be refined; it is being considered in social work education at Massey University, outside the scope of the programme reported here. The social work curriculum reflects the ANZASW Code of Ethics, in which evidence-based activity is expected to be part of the social worker's ethical responsibilities: "Social workers have a responsibility to encourage research to enhance the growth of all forms of knowledge that inform and enable social workers to effectively carry out their role and function" (ANZASW Code of Ethics, 1993, p.13). The curriculum also reflects various global and local standards for the education and training of social workers that directly or indirectly pose a challenge to promote evidence-based activity (IASSW, 2004; SWRB, 2005). Students are increasingly exposed to the idea that they should develop an evidence-based perspective in their work and, as Corby (2006, p.180) suggests, with time this should filter through to practice.

Forums of aligned services and opportunities to mentor practitioners in partnership between tertiary and social service organisations were regarded as immediate priorities. It soon became evident, however, that while the challenges of practice-based research partnerships are widely discussed in the literature, and potential barriers to successful collaboration well documented, no effective models have been reported (Sidell et al, 1996, p.100). Sidell et al (1996, p.102) claim that there is no model in the literature of a group of social work practitioners working to conduct and publish research jointly. Corby (2006, p.177) encourages more linkage between researchers (academics) and practitioners (social workers), but acknowledges challenges, including the institutional pressure on both parties to perform in particular ways. Kirk and Reid (2002, p.210) also emphasise the effect of practitioners and researchers occupying different roles in different institutions. One such obstacle was the lack of time for such an initiative; it was recognised that not even unlimited enthusiasm and creativity could plug this gap. It was soon realised that we would need to find money to appoint someone to assist part-time with this initiative and to fund real expenses. This would prove far more difficult than we expected.

2.2 Innovative practice research partnership model

No great success has as yet been reported in combining a professional practitioner's role with a researcher's role – although there were plenty of useful suggestions. Different authors mention different obstacles to the successful implementation of such a model, hinging on differing beliefs about the profession's fundamental aims and goals (Clarke and Procter, 1999; Corby, 2006; Fawcett, 2000; Sidell et al, 1996). The challenge is to overcome the practical obstacles and encourage a paradigm shift that will give 'knowing' equal importance with 'doing'. Partnerships, despite their potential difficulties, still seemed to be the vehicle – although the challenge was to conceptualise and implement this contested notion. Many of the ideas were not of themselves new; mentoring support, peer support, teamwork and partnership are themselves widely discussed in the literature. The innovation, however, was putting these concepts into a funded programme with a framework and timeline for nurturing practitioner research, so that projects were learnt from, and supported by, experts, mentors and peers who could benchmark their progress.

A partnership model was developed, using the increasingly popular notion that the experience of practitioners and service users is becoming more relevant to the delivery of services in the constantly changing social context than that of 'experts' (presumably academics, policy makers and advisors) (Kirk and Reid, 2002). We therefore proposed a series of demonstration studies or practice projects that would allow practitioners to conceptualise, undertake and disseminate their own research. These studies would be small-scale pieces of research, in various fields of practice, undertaken by partnerships between academics and social work agencies. It was expected that the projects would be driven by issues that agencies and practitioners felt were important, and carried out by practitioners, making use of mentoring relationships.

It was envisaged that workshops to provide mentoring would be spread throughout the various projects, along with specific methodological, academic and peer support sessions. An evidence-based practice symposium was proposed for sharing experiences and disseminating information, and a resource manual

documenting the material used for mentoring. In addition to individual demonstration studies, an overarching investigation into ways of facilitating the uptake of research and results amongst practitioners and in practice settings was planned. More broadly, the initiative was expected to contribute to the development of collaborative and practice-focused scholarship in the Auckland region as a model for further developments. The first steps would be to secure funding and negotiate partnerships with other agencies. This phase took 18 months.

2.3 Funding proposals

We sought funding unsuccessfully from a number of sources. One unsuccessful strategy was to seek separate funding for every activity in the programme. We soon realised that each activity is integral to the whole, so the programme does not lend itself to piecemeal funding of the various activities. Nevertheless, seeking a single funder for the programme also seemed unrealistic, as the collective activities tended not to match the criteria for existing funds. On the one hand, the proposal did not qualify as a 'community' project because of the involvement of researchers from a tertiary institution. Nor, however, did it qualify for 'research' funding, because it lacked properly formulated research questions and a robust research methodology for the practice projects (this last was left for the practice projects to determine themselves).

This experience was not exclusive to this programme. Academics often face huge obstacles in obtaining funding for applied research – especially if it involves service users or community groups (Lacey, 2006). Indeed, applied researchers in academic positions face more challenges than just funding. The expectations related to advancing an academic profile (such as the number of citations in highly ranked, international journals) often contradict the indicators of a successful practice project (such as shared ownership and dissemination of results in journals accessible to practitioners). The academics in this partnership were very well aware of these tensions.

In the end a consortium approach, whereby stakeholders are prepared to offer funding as they recognise the benefits that may accrue downstream, was chosen and eventually proved successful.

2.3.1 Consortium funding

We obtained financial support from several organisations, which together would constitute a consortium of ‘investors’. Investment was required for all the core activities of the programme, which were to be partly funded. Obviously, few funders were in a position to even consider such an investment and it took much time and commitment to sell the model. In the end, four stakeholders supported the programme in different ways.

The Ministry of Social Development’s SPEaR Linkages programme provides grants for research and evaluation projects. It aims to build knowledge for informing the development of social policy and improving the evaluation of social policy outcomes and to sponsor initiatives to improve social policy research capability, including agency research practice (<http://www.spear.govt.nz/>). The Research Methods Workshop awards (part of the Linkages programme) support seminars and workshops on methods and processes for social policy research and the development, delivery or evaluation of social policies. This programme agreed to the consortium approach and offered financial support.

Another major stakeholder prepared to invest in this innovative model was the Families Commission’s Innovative Practice Fund, which made a significant contribution over two years. The fund was established to promote research on improving the effectiveness of family-based services. Its emphasis is on practice-based projects designed to produce measurable improvement in family functioning. Studies examining practice with families and ways of enhancing the knowledge, training and practice of practitioners are also eligible for funding (<http://www.familiescommission.govt.nz/research/innovative-practice.php>).

The ASB Community Trust will partner registered charitable trusts and not-for-profit organisations that are committed to initiatives that will enhance the lives of people in the communities of Auckland and Northland (<http://www.asbtrusts.org.nz/>). The professional body representing the interests of social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand (<http://www.anzasw.org.nz/>) collaborated with the ASB Community Trust to secure a third consortium funding partner.

With the support of these stakeholders, we were in a position to appoint a project manager and establish collaborative relationships with the aim to develop guidance for research-in-practice projects through

project management, methods seminars, research mentoring and a symposium.

2.4 Developing partnerships

A number of core partnerships made this innovative model possible. Two colleagues from the University of Auckland became partners and worked on the planning and implementation of the model alongside the two principal investigators from Massey University. A skilled research practitioner was appointed as project manager, and another joined the team as a ‘critical friend’. A Māori social work educator acted as cultural advisor for both the practice projects and the GRIP team. Nine practice teams, from various fields of practice and agencies, all with their own research questions, were selected as practice partners, of which eight participated throughout. A number of topic experts were engaged for the workshops. The practice projects involved another layer of partnerships and collaborations with managers, colleagues and clients or service users; and many more collaborative relationships, some of which we are probably not aware, made GRIP possible.

Future partnerships are also envisaged. Corby (2006, p.180) promotes ongoing local consultation and liaison between agencies and research institutions, and dialogue between practitioners, researchers and service users; while Lomas (2000) encourages ongoing partnerships between researchers and policy-makers. Some of the practice teams may eventually develop such partnerships.

2.4.1 Research partners

The research partners included four academics from two universities. They provided valuable resources and experience to support the workshops, offered advice and encouragement to the people involved in the practice projects, and helped plan the workshops and symposium. As colleagues in the GRIP project team, they also helped prepare the ‘knowledge map’ and the ‘resource manual’. Galinsky et al (1993) consider the process of developing a working team to be as important as the research. In the GRIP programme, this process was important both for the team as researchers and for relations with the practice teams. Galinsky et al (1993) also warn that practitioner-research partnerships are often perceived as uni-directional, with influence and control flowing from the academic partners; the research partners went to great lengths to ensure that the relationship was inclusive in this instance.

As well as the workshops, mentoring and symposium, the research partners' team also accepted responsibility for collecting quantitative and qualitative data from this initiative in a participatory research framework. This fed into a 'knowledge map' of effective strategies and resources for strengthening research-mindedness and research activity in social service settings. The academic institutions contributed in various ways to the research environment. They delivered presentations, identified expert presenters for the research workshops, participated in team discussions and assisted practitioners with research activities. They also secured research grants, fostered collaboration and involvement in research networks and helped organise the workshops and the final symposium. They researched the overall process of the project to develop an understanding of how to use research effectively, and contributed to publications.

2.4.2 Project manager

Smith and Bryan (2005) emphasise that ambiguity and conflict are to be expected in partnerships. A person able to deal with these emotional components of relationships was sought, to be the central point of contact for participating agencies and members of the project team. The candidate appointed was a practitioner researcher with considerable front-line practice, policy and management experience. She had strong professional and community networks in the social services field, and excellent communication skills. She was required to organise and prepare resources for the workshops, help the principal investigators with reporting to funding bodies, monitor mentoring, collate material for the knowledge map and oversee logistical arrangements. She was also a mentor for several groups.

2.4.3 Critical friend

The role of the critical friend is not precisely defined, but typically requires trustworthiness, and the ability to ask provocative questions, and friendly critique (Costa and Kallick, 1993; Dahlgren et al, 2006; Kember et al, 1996). In an effort to develop a robust process, the GRIP team recruited the services of a critical friend to question and challenge group dynamic, ethics and processes. As a practitioner who has experienced research in the workplace, our critical friend brought a realistic perspective. A particular strength was her ability to ground the practitioners' projects in their research contexts, and validate the efforts of the GRIP

team to build capacity amongst participants. Like the rest of the GRIP process, the role of the critical friend evolved, and was flexible rather than predetermined.

2.4.4 Expertise

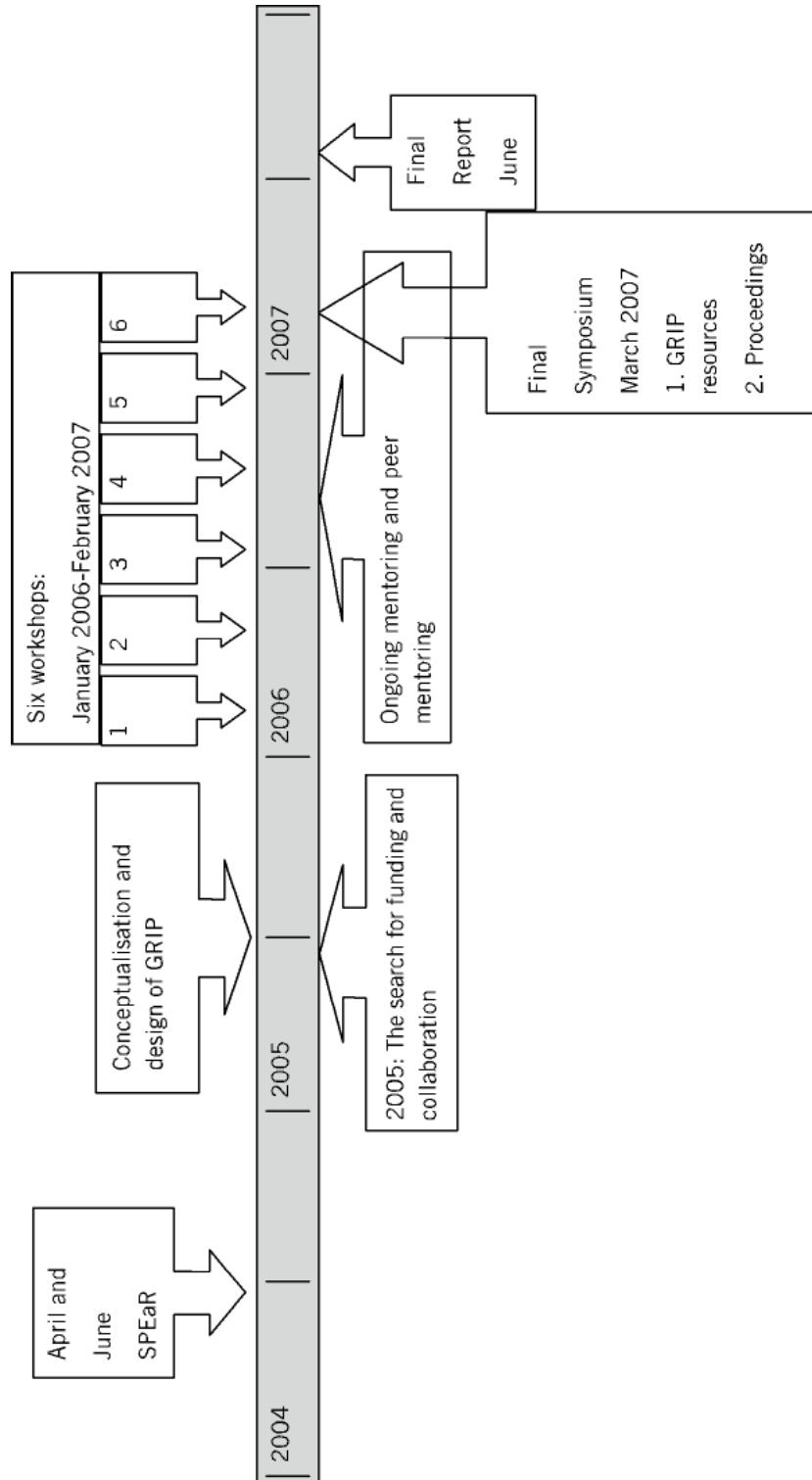
Expert speakers contributed to participants' understanding of methodologies, data collection, data analysis, presentation of results and cultural expertise. Each practice project left room for culturally appropriate methodologies and ways of working. Although the projects were controlled, negotiated and staffed by people with appropriate cultural knowledge and service expertise, we also sought to include in the workshops experts in kaupapa Māori methodologies, Pacific ways of working such as Fa'asamoa, cross-cultural working and work with vulnerable groups. In addition, a Māori social work educator acted as cultural advisor for both the practice projects and the GRIP team as needed.

2.4.5 Social service agencies

With the goal of strengthening research-mindedness and research activity in social service settings, the model was implemented with a selected group of social service practitioners. It was clear that many agendas were possible in this collaboration, and Sidell et al (1996) warn that conflicting viewpoints often contribute to the failure of collaboration. But Joubert (2006) also reports on the positives of collaboration, saying that academic practice-research collaboration can reduce the distance between research and practice and contribute to a body of knowledge for social work. The challenge was to find the balance between adequate individual gain and a focus on shared benefits.

The partnership involved practitioners in conceptualising, undertaking and disseminating small-scale research projects driven by their own practice questions and agendas. Any practitioner or team of colleagues with enthusiasm for developing research in practice, a need to obtain evidence to advance practice initiatives and a willingness to make a commitment for the length of this programme, qualified as a potential partner. Participation did not presume or preclude previous research experience. Various qualitative and quantitative methodologies were employed for these practice projects, including among others literature surveys to secondary data-mining. An overview of the emergence and implementation of the GRIP programme is outlined in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The emergence and implementation of GRIP



3. THE GRIP PROGRAMME

This section explores the aims of the GRIP programme, the structure and dynamic of the programme and the knowledge map.

3.1 Aims of the GRIP programme

The overarching goal of the GRIP programme was to help develop a culture of practitioner enquiry in social service agencies in Auckland. GRIP sought to work with these agencies to explore research questions of immediate concern to practitioners, with a view to facilitating change and improving services. Since little is known about what facilitates or impedes such research activity, our objectives went beyond stimulating research amongst these practice agencies. We sought to learn from the experience of developing such an initiative in itself. Thus the objective of GRIP's own enquiry was to understand what works in facilitating the uptake of research activity and, potentially, the results of research amongst social work and community practitioners in organisations and in practice settings.

GRIP was overseen by a project team (consisting of the Massey University grant-holders and University of Auckland partners), a practitioner advisor (the critical friend) and managed by a project manager. The outcomes sought were four fold:

- > Small practice projects involving groups of practitioners in conceptualising, designing, undertaking and disseminating research.
- > A resource manual for practitioners compiled from material used to mentor the practice projects and from the six workshops, and insights gathered during the programme.

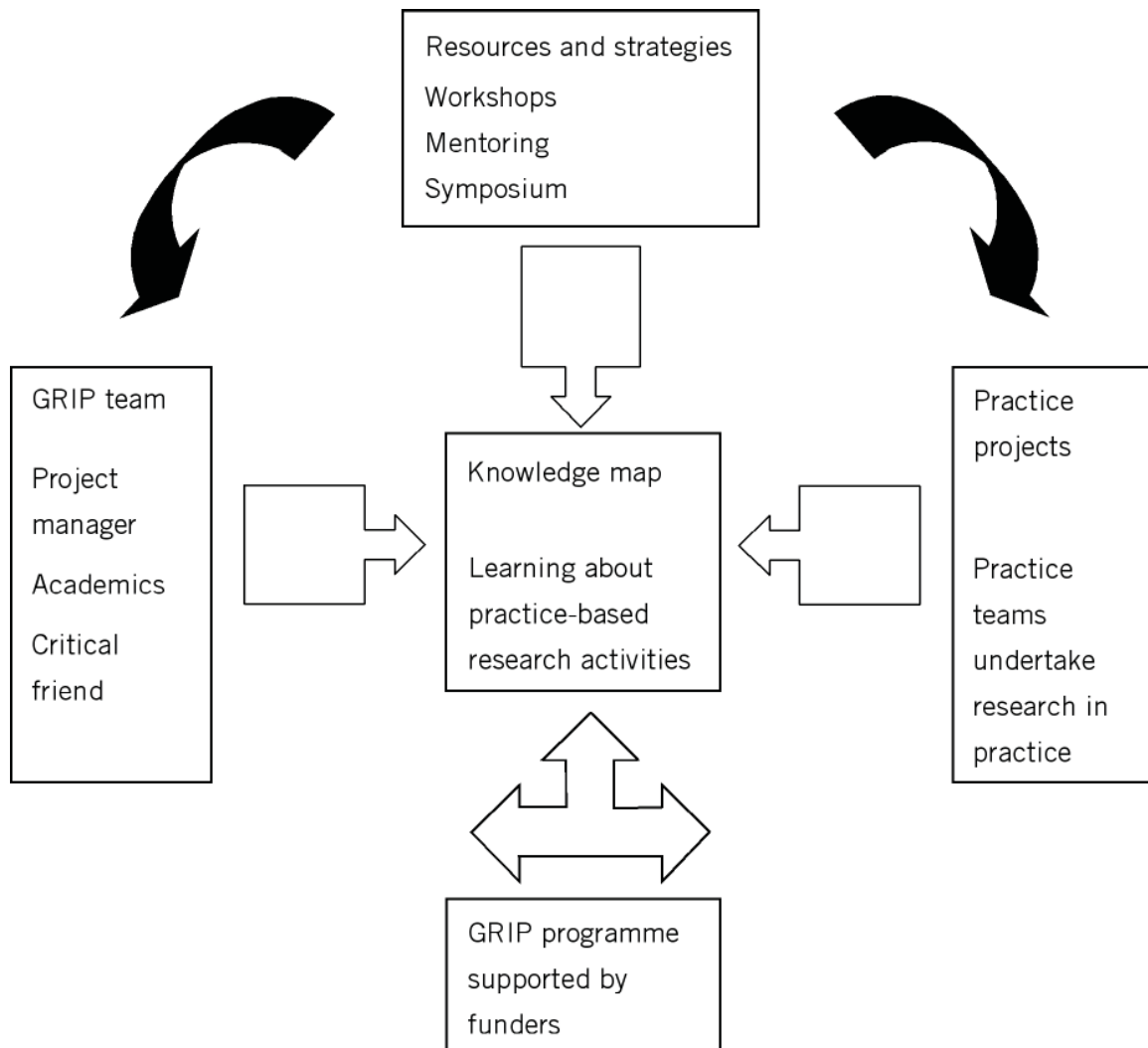
- > A greater understanding of what helps practitioners to take up research in practice settings, and what is effective in developing collaborative and practice-focused inquiry.
- > A practice-research symposium to share experiences and disseminate information about the practice projects and the GRIP process more generally.

3.2 The structure and dynamic of the GRIP programme

GRIP is a collaborative programme bringing together practitioners, academics, agencies and funding bodies to encourage the development of a research culture in social services. This time-limited initiative provided a number of selected practice teams with support in undertaking their own research. A series of supporting interventions were trialled on the groups, including workshops, academic mentors, peer mentoring and various written resources and supports. Opportunities to reflect on interventions were integral to the GRIP process. Figure 2 illustrates the components and relationships in the GRIP programme.

To reduce the risk of staff turnover and to secure the benefits of teamwork, GRIP did not involve individual projects. The projects were not intended to fulfil the requirements for academic qualifications; and because of the constraints of funding and reporting GRIP did not intend to support multi-year projects. Direct supervision and participation of academics in the research activities was not intended. The intention was that the projects should be for practice, by practitioners, with the support of university teams.

Figure 2: Structure and dynamic of the GRIP programme



3.2.1 Recruitment

In February 2006, practitioners from a broad range of social service agencies in greater Auckland attended the first of six funded workshops and were invited to propose research relevant to their practice. The agencies were recruited through the networks and connections of the two institutions and the project manager. Even at this early stage we were aware that some particular institutions were less likely to be part of our networks and to attend such a session. Whilst we were confident of covering a range of fields of practice, we worked hard to find potential organisational providers that were Māori-focused, Pacific providers and providers addressing the needs of new migrant groups. Wherever possible we sought to include a wide range of fields of practice and of statutory and community organisations.

More than 35 people from approximately 20 agencies or units attended the first workshop. There was a presentation on the background and aims of the initiative, and the types of research projects considered suitable. Various exercises (role play, brainstorming and small group discussions) were used to help them recall the sorts of conversations and questions that arise on the topic of practice in their workplaces. They were then invited to form groups representing possible teams (where colleagues from the same or similar agencies were present), or to begin individually to draft expressions of interest or to formulate requests for further input with GRIP team members to help develop expressions of interest.

The timeline for the programme required groups to consider projects that would run over the year from February 2006, culminating in a symposium in March 2007. Expressions of interest were sought from interested groups. They were required to demonstrate that the proposed project had the following features:

- > origins from, within and for practice
- > a small keen group of practitioners, staff or consumers
- > a small-scale, feasible topic
- > a client or service-delivery focus
- > sufficient support from within the agency
- > potential for GRIP to add value.

(Source: Presentation at the GRIP seminar, February 2006)

The application to funders had expressed the hope of inspiring six such projects, but the response from agencies was overwhelming. Seven expressions of interest and eight requests for further input were received on the day, and several visits were made to workplaces for further discussion. A total of 18 expressions of interest were eventually submitted.

A selection process was developed, using the criteria set at the workshop (as listed above) and included in the expression of interest form. The potential for GRIP to add value was also a consideration, as was ensuring a range of agencies were represented and that their client bases related to the focus on families. Members of the GRIP team considered the expressions of interest individually then discussed them at a selection meeting. We endeavoured to include a significant proportion of projects that were family-focused, and covered a range of agency types and client bases. Some projects were clearly suitable or unsuitable. Some were candidates for reconsideration after further development, and efforts were made to secure support for them via their employing agencies. Ultimately, nine projects were selected and invited to attend the next workshop, in early April.

3.2.2 The practice projects

Nine practice projects were selected in March, and began their research. An initial focus was helping groups shape their research questions and consider suitable approaches to them, such as reviewing national and international literature, evidence and best practice, use of existing data held by their agencies (secondary data analysis and data mining), or collecting new empirical material (primary data collection). Initiatives suitable for practitioner inquiry and small-scale research might include the:

- > description and assessment of intervention logic, practice decisions, management systems or policies
- > description and summary of client characteristics and their histories of service usage
- > collection and analysis of service-users' views on service delivery

- > collection of views from colleagues or other professionals about service delivery or internal work processes.

It was not possible to determine the questions in advance – decisions on the focus of questions, the scope of projects and the research approach were taken, in collaboration within the individual agencies, by practitioners according to their needs and interests. Groups were also expected to seek support and approval for their projects from the managers and Boards of their employing organisations.

Basic social work principles informed the projects: transparency; reciprocity; social sensitivity; empowerment and social change; recognition of multiple accountabilities; Treaty partnership. Nevertheless, how the research should be undertaken required a case-by-case consideration of the agency, and its context, mission and client base. Each practice project left room for appropriate cultural methodologies and ways of working with sensitive or vulnerable groups of services' users and consumers. For example, a practice project undertaken with an iwi agency or Pacific service provider would require a consideration of culturally appropriate approaches, and resources would be needed to provide guidance and support in each particular case depending on expressed and perceived needs. The aim was for projects to be controlled, negotiated and staffed by people with appropriate cultural knowledge and service expertise. Ethical considerations and approval were the responsibility of the individual teams. They all gave considerable attention to ethical issues pertaining to their projects, and obtained peer review and approval from appropriate bodies. Ideally we sought to be responsive to the needs of projects, throughout the GRIP initiative. There was also recognition that practice groups might be able to avail themselves of sources of support from within their own organisations, such as protocol advisors and knowledgeable colleagues, as well as service users and consumers.

The studies originated with a wide range of agencies, including District Health Board units, a wide variety of

NGOs and a branch of the Council of Social Services. The practitioners were predominantly social and community workers, but there were also therapists, counsellors and psychologists. At the beginning of the programme in an 'icebreaker' exercise, practitioners located their own research experience on a continuum from almost nil to extensive (that latter representing considerable postgraduate research).

A prerequisite for participation was that each project should ultimately be about improving services to clients. This requirement accommodated a range of approaches: while some projects evaluate a programme or tool, others scrutinise aspects of social work activity in their agencies and seek ways of improving it. Two projects investigated reasons for the low uptake of programmes, and one took the first steps in a broad-based needs assessment.

A range of research approaches, methodologies and methods were employed. Most of the projects undertook literature reviews in varying depth, depending on the topic and context. Access to literature was varied: some team members were students at tertiary institutions; and those working in larger organisations may have had access through partnership arrangements with universities. We advised teams to consider carefully the purpose of any literature review; we did not want projects to founder on huge literature reviews with international and cross-disciplinary coverage, where a more selective review of local material or a systematic review might suffice. Most importantly, we wanted the literature review and research approach to be tailored to their research questions and needs. Methodologies also varied. Quantitative methods included 'data-mining' of clients' files and a questionnaire survey of community agencies. A number of projects used individual and group interviews to gather qualitative data from staff or other agencies, clients and client families. Some projects used particular cultural approaches and organising frameworks for analysing and interpreting the data. Table 1 provides a summary of the key features of the participating projects.

Table 1: Research projects selected for participation in GRIP

Agency	Description of agency	Focus of the research	Research methodology	Membership
ADHB Epsom Day Unit	Community health agency delivering specialised services to women	Evaluate the impact of a screening tool on professional staff	Analysis of past and current administrative data; focus groups with medical and social work staff	Team leader and staff members from an existing practice team participated in GRIP.
Bo-Ai-She	Community mental health support programme for Chinese consumers	Evaluate the effectiveness of a non-Chinese programme for use with Chinese consumers in New Zealand	Interviews and focus groups with consumers, their families and mental health professionals	Individuals were involved with the support programme as volunteers and known to each other prior to GRIP.
Waipareira Pasifika	Community social service working with Māori families	Develop evaluation processes for family assessment and intervention	Focus groups with whānau	An existing practice team participated in GRIP.
Family Works Northern – Te Hononga	Early parenting support programme to Pacific families	Develop a Pacific social work practice model for families	Interviews and focus groups with staff	An existing practice team participated in GRIP.
Auckland City Hospital	Hospital social workers	Developing a best-practice social work model for family meetings	Focus groups with social workers and other hospital staff	An existing team of colleagues, not engaged as a practice team prior to GRIP, participated in GRIP.
SAFE	Community agency working with male sex offenders	Investigate the reasons for non-engagement and non-completion of programmes	Data mining from files	An existing practice team participated in GRIP.
Shakti Family Settlement and Social Services	Domestic violence agency working with migrants	Explore factors impacting on participation by male clients in violence-prevention programmes	Interviews with staff at agencies successfully recruiting men to domestic violence programmes	An existing practice team initially participated in GRIP, but high staff turnover caused frequent changes in membership.
North Shore Community and Social Services	Council of Social Services	A stock-take of social services to assess need in the broad area covered	A web-based and paper questionnaire for agencies providing social services	An existing practice team participated in GRIP. A contract researcher was included in the team.
Foundation for Youth Development and TYLA	Two agencies delivering prevention services to at-risk youth	Investigate the effectiveness of goal-setting as a tool for working with young people	Focus groups and interviews with participants in programmes	Two practice teams not previously known to each other participated in GRIP.

3.2.3 Workshop support

Six workshops, spread between February 2006 and February 2007, allowed a broad coverage of the research process and the more significant steps that research projects must traverse.

The second workshop in April drew the selected project teams together, and began the process of developing a research question that could be answered within the timeframe of the GRIP programme. Participants explored the potential focus and scope of their enquiry, and considered where and how they could obtain data. Information was provided on database searching and the retrieval and synthesis of information, and participants were encouraged to pool resources while conducting their literature reviews. In the second workshop the four academic members of the GRIP team presented an overview of the research process, including refining the research question, using the literature, thinking through the ethical issues and thinking about methodology.

There was also discussion of mentoring, and mentors were allocated to the teams. The mentors were the four academics and the project manager, and a Māori cultural advisor agreed to hold additional sessions with one team in particular. Teams were also encouraged to consider who in their agencies or networks could provide them with cultural advice. The importance of appropriate consideration of ethical issues – particularly where data collected for service provision purposes are being considered for use in research – was highlighted in the workshops and in mentoring. The teams also had to consider sources of appropriate support and networks regarding ethical considerations. Mentoring agreements were distributed for completion, along with a template for applications for a small contestable fund to help cover costs (this was mainly directed at teams

from the less well-funded agencies). Groups were encouraged to begin mapping out their own processes and organising meetings and mentoring.

Subsequent workshops addressed the stages of the research process, the core ethical concerns and the cultural and organisational challenges of social service research. Expert speakers contributed sessions on quantitative and qualitative methodologies, data collection, data analysis, the presentation of results and cultural expertise.

Table 2 summarises the workshop series. From the start we recognised the wide variety of the projects and the wide spectrum of skills and experience involved. The huge disparity in research knowledge and skills amongst participants, and different rates of progress in the research made it impossible to cater to all every time. Rather, the workshops had multiple objectives:

- > Providing an opportunity to increase general research knowledge.
- > Informing specific research activity where possible.
- > Meeting and sharing experiences with other participants and discussing issues as they arose during the research.
- > Helping projects set themselves goals and benchmark their progress.

Each workshop had a particular focus, and styles of presentation and facilitation varied. The GRIP team has collated the resources used during the year at the workshops and in mentoring, as 'Growing Research in Practice: A collection of resources'. The collection was presented to the GRIP participants at the symposium and made available electronically on the Massey University and University of Auckland websites for wider access (see Appendix 1).

Table 2: Focus of the workshops

Workshop	Topic	Activities (not including regular sharing)
February 2006	<p>Introduction to GRIP</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Explanation of the proposed programme - Call for expressions of interest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Presentations by research partners (GRIP team) - Brainstorm sessions - Small group discussions to begin the formulation of expressions of interest
April 2006	<p>Getting started</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Refining the research question - Using the literature - Thinking through the ethical issues - Thinking about methodology 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Presentations by GRIP team to the selected groups about GRIP - Mapping of a timeline and the next tasks - Allocation of mentors to practice projects
June 2006	<p>Designing methodologies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Interviews and focus groups - Surveys – old and new data - Consider cultural issues in data collection - Using search engines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Guest speakers outlining a range of methodological and cultural issues (Carl Davidson, Andrew Sporle, Leland Ruwhiu) - GRIP team present information on their own data collection - Hands-on session on using search engines at Massey University library
August 2006	<p>Data collection and analysis of diverse perspectives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Responding to difference - Pasifika research guidelines - Enabling research in the workplace 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Guest speakers on Pasifika and migrant research (Tanya Wendt Samu, Ruth de Souza) - Panel discussion - ‘World Café’ session exploring factors impacting on research in the workplace (Brown and Issacs, 2005)
November 2006	<p>Analysing and organising data</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Quantitative data analysis - Qualitative data analysis - Growing as researchers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Guest speakers on data analysis (Carl Davidson, Barry MacDonald) - Small group sessions on own practice projects - Group discussion on planning
February 2007	<p>Writing and presenting findings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Writing a research report - Doing good presentations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Guest speakers on ways to write research reports and present research findings (Ruth de Souza, Eva McLaren) - Planning for the symposium and thinking about completing GRIP projects
March 2007	<p>Symposium: Celebrating a gripping year</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Contemplating future directions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Keynote speakers on practitioner research (Susan Groundwater-Smith and Linda Tuhiwai-Smith) - Presentations from each of the groups on the practice projects

3.2.4 Mentoring support

At the second workshop mentors were assigned to the teams. The benefits of mentoring relationships in contexts such as business, education and health and social services have been outlined in literature. Pololi and Knight (2005, p.867) note that positive mentoring practices provide mutual benefits to personal and career growth. They claim that mentors view mentoring as part of a developmental life stage, and an opportunity for professionals to ‘give something back’ to their professions. There is overwhelming agreement in recent literature that the key factor in the success of mentoring is the quality of the relationship itself (Klasen and Clutterbuck, 2002; Noam and Fiore, 2004; Rhodes, Spencer, Keller, Liang, and Noam 2006; Zerwekh and Claborn, 2006). High-quality mentoring relationships are characterised primarily by mutual trust (Klasen and Clutterbuck (2002, p.344). Quality of relationships is also shown to be influenced by the pairing of the mentor with the mentee; some significant factors in successful matching are demographic and background characteristics such as gender, age and race/ethnicity (Noam and Fiore, 2004), and common background in field of practice or area of interest (Zerwekh and Claborn, 2006).

These factors were taken into account in assigning mentors to teams, in an effort to manage power relationships and conflicts of interest. Mentors met regularly with the teams in the workplace and used email to communicate ideas, drafts and dilemmas. Studies indicate that willingness contributes to the success of a mentoring relationship, and outcomes tend to be better when mentees want to be in the relationship and value their mentor’s intervention (Klasen and Clutterbuck, 2002). Therefore the mentoring aimed to be supportive and empowering, rather than supervisory, and responsive to the queries or concerns raised by the individual teams themselves. Mentors encouraged a focus on good project management; for example, teams were expected to create timelines for their projects, and assign tasks and set milestones for the completion of activities en route to final completion. When research projects required the collection of new empirical data, the mentors helped clarify research questions and approaches, with a particular emphasis on planning, timelines, methods, sample size and feasibility. Particular attention was paid to research ethics. Discussions of these matters between mentors and teams focused on

the needs of the practitioners themselves. The aim was to develop a collaborative mentoring relationship with elements of “shared decision-making, and systems thinking”, as described by Kochan and Trimble (2000, p.20). It remains to be seen how the GRIP mentoring relationships are maintained in the future. Reports on mentoring sessions were kept and discussed at GRIP meetings to assess the progress of the groups and to help manage any difficulties.

3.2.5 The symposium

Seven of the nine groups selected to participate in GRIP presented their research projects at the GRIP symposium, with varying emphases on their GRIP experience and the outcomes of their research. In keeping with the purpose of nurturing collaborative relationships, a community centre was selected as the venue, because it was accessible to practitioners and not associated with any of the universities. Low-key technology made the presentations less daunting, and an intimate setting allowed relatively informal presentations. Groups were asked to volunteer to help with the tasks involved in running the symposium. This was intended to encourage shared ownership and contribution to the logistics of disseminating research.

The keynote addresses by two eminent speakers – Honorary Professor Susan Groundwater-Smith of the Centre for Practitioner Research at Sydney University and Professor Linda Tuhiwai-Smith of the University of Auckland – attracted good attendance from our funding agencies, the management of the agencies involved in the research and a wide range of practitioners from the social services, as well as the GRIP practitioners and their colleagues. The message of the symposium was encouragement to managers and practitioners to consider undertaking practitioner research within their agencies, with a view to developing research skills and improving social practice; but it also highlighted barriers to doing so. A public relations plan by Massey University journalists ensured that this message reached a wider audience.

The complete, unedited research reports from the keynote speakers and the GRIP practice teams were collated as ‘A Collection of Papers’ and made available electronically to all symposium participants and in hard copy to the practice teams. It is available electronically on the Massey University and University of Auckland websites (see Appendix 2).

3.3 The knowledge map

There is very little understanding of the way small-scale studies impact on social service organisations, fields of practice, colleagues and practitioner-researchers themselves. The knowledge map component of the programme was intended to address this gap by providing at least some understanding of the life of the practice projects and the period following their completion. The knowledge map process involved gathering and recording information from the project participants (mentors, practitioner teams, team contacts, project manager and critical friend) at various points (before, during and following the completion of the practice projects).

3.4 Data collection and analysis

Data were collected in two phases, the first from feedback sheets, mentoring records and minutes recorded by the GRIP team, and the second from group and individual interviews. We have considered the ethical issues regarding the collection of these data, including conflict of interest, respect for the rights of participants and potential of harm to parties involved. We have managed them effectively in the team and in our relationship with the practice teams, by means of measures outlined in the ethics applications. Ethics approval was obtained for phase one from Massey University for the collection of data at workshops, mentoring sessions and meetings, and for phase two from the University of Auckland for participant interviews to supplement our understanding of participants' experiences.

The workshops were useful opportunities to collect data, and at each workshop project participants have been asked to complete feedback sheets to record their experiences over time. The feedback sheets were purpose-designed for each workshop, to capture feedback on the content of the particular session and the method of facilitation used. The response rate fluctuated but was consistently high, as the participants were keen to provide feedback. At each workshop the data collated were substantial, in terms of both the number of feedback sheets and the quality of the feedback provided. The sheets were analysed by the project manager after every workshop, using frequencies where appropriate, and identifying themes where qualitative reactions were sought. The GRIP

team also captured their own experiences, reflections and learning from their engagement with this process. Reports on mentoring sessions were used effectively as data in developing the knowledge map. All the team members made a commitment to record their reflections on mentoring sessions and to note key insights and questions that arose from workshops. The minutes from two GRIP team discussions were recorded and transcribed to add to the rich set of data. The critical friend facilitated these discussions in her wider role of questioning and challenging group dynamics, ethics and processes.

In addition, between September and November 2006, semi-structured group interviews of about an hour were conducted with members of five of the practice teams, comprising 27 individuals in total. Participation in the group interviews was determined in part by availability. It was decided to hold the interview with practice team groups, not across teams, to allow them to share their unique group experiences. Individual one-hour interviews with seven of the project leaders were also conducted, following a similar semi-structured interview schedule. Interviews were regarded as the most appropriate method of data collection as we were keen to obtain information-rich experiences, rather than measurable outcomes. The same set of open-ended questions was asked of all the respondents, seeking information on:

- > practitioners' perceptions of the dissemination of research and knowledge
- > barriers to practitioner research
- > perceptions of the probable impact of the GRIP programme over time
- > the extent to which, if at all, GRIP had influenced workplace research culture.

These questions reflected the aim of the study, which was to assess strategies and resources for strengthening research-mindedness and activity in social service settings, and also the feedback obtained from phase one. The interviews were conducted by members of the GRIP team, the project manager and the critical friend. Care was taken to ensure that no person who had been a mentor with a specific group interviewed members of that group, and we also had to conduct the interviews at a time convenient to the very busy practitioners. The interviews were not recorded in any particular sequence, and analysis

started after all the interview data had been collected. The first level of analysis, by the project manager, sought to recognise themes and patterns. Another layer of analysis followed, involving discussing the themes and patterns in a GRIP team meeting. The data are obviously very rich and there is the potential for building on it longitudinally. Information collected during the GRIP process could illuminate the impact of providing support and mentoring to practitioners in social work practice. There are interrelated questions of interest

that might be asked if the study were transferred to the context of actual practice in agencies: To what extent is a research culture facilitated in the organisation? Are there perceived and measurable changes to practice and service delivery? What other differences does a practice project make in the team, organisation or field of practice? Collecting data across the projects, and including a diverse range of services agencies in GRIP, would allow tentative models of the impact of research to be scoped for social work in New Zealand.

4. THE FACILITATION OF GRIP

This section explores the findings from the data collected from the practice projects, and offers an interpretation of the findings in relation to the facilitation of the research. The findings regarding outcomes will be discussed in Section 5.

4.1 The context of data collection

The goal of the GRIP programme was to develop effective strategies and resources for strengthening research-mindedness and research activity in social work settings in Auckland. The GRIP programme provided workshops and mentoring (resources) to selected practitioner groups to undertake research; it also set timeframes and provided ongoing support (strategies).

Eight project groups undertaking practitioner research projects attended the workshops, where guest speakers shared their knowledge on aspects of research. Seven of the eight presented their research at the symposium in March 2007 and all of them contributed to the collection of papers by the end of April. All the groups took advantage of the mentoring offered, monthly or six-weekly as time allowed, focused on supporting the progress of their research projects. Beneath this broad-brush surface a more nuanced set of processes and range of experiences can be discerned. Data collected throughout the programme provide an indication of the learning and thinking, opinions and feelings of all of the participants in GRIP. This section attempts to assess the effectiveness of the GRIP resources and strategies on the basis of the data collected.

4.2 Participants and their prior learning and experience

The most significant resource was, of course, the people involved – the participants of the groups and the members of the GRIP team. The wide range of people and agencies that expressed interest was reflected in the research groups. Not only did the practitioner researchers hail from a wide range of agencies and practice types from across the Auckland region; but within and among the groups there were huge variations in research knowledge and experience, practice knowledge and experience, practice type and qualifications and cultural origins and cultural

understanding. While some participants had done little or no research beyond a research paper towards a social work diploma (and one acknowledged that this did not involve the academic rigour required for undertaking, for example, literature reviews), quite a number were doing or had completed post graduate studies. While a few participants were keen readers of articles and books related to their topics, others struggled to begin, let alone complete, an article or chapter, or comment on it. Some participants had no prior understanding of the fastidiousness needed for research, and blanched at the word ‘analysis’.

The teams included various social and health professionals. Beside social workers, there were a number of mental health practitioners including a psychiatrist, several psychotherapists and various managers (most of whom were also qualified or experienced social practitioners). The vast majority of research teams drew upon the combined experience available within their agencies. Some of these practice teams were established prior to GRIP, while others were newly compiled for the purpose of GRIP. One team chose to employ a researcher during the year with external funding obtained in order to expand the research beyond GRIP. Two teams had very little research skill or experience amongst them at the outset, while members of several teams had research experience. In the remaining three teams, the majority of team members had some research experience, sometimes considerable. This had implications for the workshop topics, the content and frequency of mentoring sessions and the peer mentoring that took place, as different levels of support were needed by the different teams at various stages. Some struggled and sought more advice, but reported huge learning and completed regardless; while others were more confident but needed mentoring for other reasons, such as ensuring the reporting of progress and setting timelines.

4.2.1 Cultural considerations

Practice and research entail cultural considerations. Cultural origin and knowledge were regarded as at least as important as research skill in some teams, and as the main identifying factors in others. Most groups were culturally homogeneous (Pacific, Māori, Asian or European) reflecting the configuration of New Zealand social services and its practice of specialised provision entirely or predominantly by members of the same or related cultures as those of the

service users. Only one team, in fact, was deliberately cross-cultural in composition, with Māori, Pacific and European representation. Other teams were more culture-specific (though no doubt including an array of cultural backgrounds within them), with a Chinese team, a team primarily from the Indian sub-continent, a Māori team and a Pacific (mainly Samoan and Tongan) team and three European teams. The GRIP team, itself was also entirely European, although in an attempt to offset this, speakers and mentors from other cultures were brought in.

4.2.2 Motivation for participation

Participants were asked about their motivation for the research initially in the expressions of interest and several workshops during the year, in an attempt to assess the need for support in this regard. A number of reasons were reported. By far the most significant motivator was an interest in and passion for improving practice and knowledge, for the individual workers and the agency, but ultimately to benefit clients and communities. Of 24 participants who returned feedback forms at the April workshop, nine felt GRIP was an opportunity to increase their agency's knowledge and skills, and this was confirmed during the interviews.

Seven of the participants indicated that GRIP was a personal opportunity or challenge to themselves. Eleven were passionate about improving their practice or developing themselves professionally and their careers; the need to be seen to do this by employers was mentioned by some as a motivating factor, but never as the main reason. One or two team members reported having initially been pressured into joining by team leaders, but as GRIP developed, being pleased they did.

An additional seven felt it would benefit their clients and communities or their relationships with them; and for some, GRIP was simply 'the right thing at the right time'.

4.2.3 Group dynamics

One person, who eventually came to be known as the team leader, took responsibility in each team. The teams' particular characteristics and dynamics had to be managed, and while issues about group interactions rarely came to the notice of the GRIP team, it was clear that relationships and dynamics affected the groups in varied ways. Groups were formed in various ways:

- 1) Pre-formed practice teams: These practitioners had worked together as practice teams before GRIP, knew each other well and had established relationships. Every member of such a pre-existing team became a de facto member of the GRIP project team.
- 2) Intra-agency practice teams: These practitioners worked in the same agency and knew of each other, but had not necessarily worked together.
- 3) Inter-agency practice teams: These teams were purpose-built across sites for the purpose of GRIP, but members knew each other through existing networks.
- 4) Ad hoc practice teams: These teams were developed across agencies for the purpose of GRIP, but the members did not know of each other previously.

The different types of teams had different boundaries. Some – mostly the pre-formed teams – had a fixed membership with no changes during the life of GRIP, while others had a fluid approach to membership, particularly the intra-agency teams. The varying membership was not always voluntary – a surprising number of career moves also changed membership.

Asked at the third workshop how they felt their teams were collaborating, most felt it was going well. Finding times of mutual convenience for meetings, especially working around sick or annual leave, was a major issue (see also 4.4.3 Time management) and managing differences in knowledge and understanding and cultural differences were also identified as issues. While fitting in with others in the group in these ways no doubt required good coping mechanisms at times from all concerned, the sharing and collaboration that took place seems to have been a major strength in getting through the work:

It's just you feel like other people are committed to it and [team mates] have also done a bit of research and I read quite a significant piece of research and I thought if [team mate] can do it, I'm sure that I can do it. It's just [also] that feeling of 'positive-ness' that comes from people and just the group, I think that four or five of us we come together, we talk, we share any frustrations, anything but we share and we seem to come off feeling re-energised so I think it's just a whole lot of things.

Despite other forces working against teamwork, friendship and collegiality provided the glue in some cases. Working in a team was perceived as providing learning opportunities:

Sometimes we've had very different thoughts and some diverse thoughts on things but by talking them through we always come up with something that everybody agrees on and also because of the range of experience has helped tremendously. I mean I'm relatively new so I draw on a lot of their experiences and that has been really beneficial too.

From our experience, it is clear that a research process in practice teams is possible and can be enjoyable and rewarding for groups.

4.2.4 Leadership roles

Leadership was perceived and responded to in a number of ways. The leadership role was probably subject to interpretation according to personality, circumstances, culture and team make-up. Some leaders were the main drivers of the research projects, although in the course of the year some became more or less so as their team members' enthusiasm grew or waned. In our experience, team leaders had to juggle multiple roles, including those of facilitator, diarist, manager, motivator and educator.

One team leader reflected:

I think I was very much the driver in the beginning but not now which for me is fantastic. There's been a couple of times I haven't been here, the meetings have carried on, things have been done fantastically well ... That's a great joy for me that it feels very shared now.

Whereas another finished up doing all the fieldwork and, in effect, became a sole researcher, while acknowledging the support of the team and involving them in the presentation at the symposium.

Team members indicated that the leader role was essential to the survival of the projects, citing their leaders' role in motivating, communicating logistics, reminding of commitments and timeframes and keeping focus:

- > I think you need to have someone to drive it and ... we all have other commitments and for me the priority is our clinical work, that's our core business but having someone that believes in what we were doing and actually give us that push and reminding and giving emails ...

- > I think [team leader] plays a big part in that as well in getting us focused, we have a tendency to be ... everywhere else and to put other things in priority as well so it's trying to get a balance there so she's the one that cracks the whip and brings us back in and focuses us again ...
- > Well I like to think that members of the team are naturally driven themselves but yeah I sort of like someone at the front leading really, that's just my thought.
- > I think [team leader] has been very instrumental in making sure that it progresses, you know that something happens, that plans get set for the next month so it's kept it going. Without that role it would have been absolutely ...
- > I think we rely on [team leader] to remind us. I rely on [team leader] to be the most responsible at reminding and making sure that it does happen.

The boundaries between leadership and management in some practice teams were blurred, as a few leaders were also managers of the same teams. This created issues at times, though they were managed with humour:

Refocusing, cohesion, that's happening (thanks to the team leader). She doesn't realise how bossy she is sometimes. After all she is the boss.

Leaders as managers also brought benefits, allowing workload to be managed and tasks delegated. These issues posed great difficulties, however, in teams where management was not supportive or involved in teams' activities, in stark contrast with the teams where this was an integrated role.

Career moves were especially common amongst the leaders, five of them leaving for jobs in other agencies during the year. Two continued to participate and contribute to their groups. Interim leaders were not established in two of the groups, one of which folded altogether, the other coming very close to it.

4.3 Prior investment in social work research

A few of the participating agencies had a history of research in practice, while others had not given it much thought at the time of GRIP. The support from the agencies varied, but was not necessarily related to the extent of previous involvement in research-related activities. At the high end of the support scale, four

team leaders reported that their agencies had already decided to pursue research activity and were very supportive of the project. Only one agency had any history of social practitioner research before GRIP, although two had commissioned research by outsiders, with some involvement of practitioners. At the lower end of the continuum, others were supportive in theory or even in their policy but did not necessarily provide effective support systems. One agency, although it had a research committee, had never really considered practitioner research until GRIP, but was now fully supportive.

The kinds of support provided varied. All the teams had good support from immediate managers in the sense of permission to conduct the research and to attend workshops and mentoring. Two teams in particular were from very small and resource-poor agencies, so these researchers had no choice but to do this work in their own time. Others came from large and relatively well-resourced agencies, but their workloads appeared to be overwhelming. Two agencies were restructured during the time, causing a huge loss of staff and management personnel, and at least one other suffered a sudden loss of staff which impacted heavily on the group. A few others were affected particularly by the loss of leaders.

In the interviews, some participants spoke of their work environment as impoverished in terms of opportunities for reflection and enquiry into practice improvement:

We need to be fed as social workers and that feeding is sometimes the education development, it's about research as well and that there has to be space. The organisation has to give you space, has to give you resources so you can be fed but often that's not built in, into the work time and expectations. I think things are improving actually. I really do think they're improving. I think we've been... there's times when I feel that we've been bankrupted because there's just no time, well there's no funding for development and there's no funding for research.

Not everyone agreed that things were improving:

Looking at my own practice, it's still in some isolation because in this environment there seem to be fewer people that are interested in talking through the nitty-gritty of the ups and downs of (social) work. I think of my own practice where things went well, where I felt I could have done

a lot better or been more helpful so I've lost the colleagues that were really keen about that stuff and perhaps the level of supervision where there was a real opportunity to look at my own practice, so it's like I'm in the washing machine at the moment, very much thinking about my own practice but looking forward to more opportunities to keep learning really. I feel like ... there's less opportunity actually to be growing professionally for whatever reason.

Most team leaders reported that the idea of practitioner research was 'very very foreign' to their agencies; and two of them likened their research work to cutting a new roadway or bush track through the agency – to be, they hoped, widened into a motorway in the future.

Interest from colleagues not involved in the research varied from 'pretty oblivious' to 'increasing'. Staff invited to participate in interviews and focus groups were keen, and one group, given the opportunity to think about their practice and values, found it "a really affirming experience for everybody ... and stimulating". In a team with members from various parts of the same agency, it helped build relationships across it, amongst social workers. In another group, the research was happening 'in a silo' at that site and in that team, though there was talk of extending research activity across the agency in the future. Such a subsequent round of research would be easier to organise, it was recognised: "I'm far more informed than I was before. It's not as difficult as we (the agency) have made it out to be in the past."

When completing their expressions of interest, applicants were asked to describe the support they had from their organisation or manager to commit to the initiative, or the assistance they felt they might need to obtain support or permission. Most indicated they would have the support required. At the first workshop after selection, 11 out of 24 respondents said management had supported them in attending the workshop, and some felt well supported by their colleagues. Three had had cover provided in their absence, probably reflecting the nature of their roles.

It is quite amazing against this background, which is perhaps typical of social services in the 21st century, that any research was completed at all. It was fortunate that, from the outset, the groups were encouraged to keep their topics small and manageable – 'small is beautiful' was the motto. Most were seen as preliminary studies, with some big ambitions for future work.

4.4 The research

4.4.1 Participating in GRIP

A number of practitioners may have underestimated the amount and type of support they would need, and certainly the GRIP team did not sufficiently appreciate this either in the initial stages. Finding the time away from casework proved critical to research and, while the idea of the research may have appealed to management, they did not actually reduce caseloads to allow it to be done.

Four months into the project, all the participants were finding it difficult to find time for their research, many commenting on this in their feedback (see Time management 4.4.3). Two months later the vast majority said that their research was recognised as part of their work, although none indicated that time was being allowed for it. Of 24 respondents, 14 said they discussed it in their supervision and 19 had it included in their development plans; 14 expected it to carry some weight in their performance appraisal.

Asked to estimate in whose time they were doing their research work, nine (out of 17) said they had so far done 70 percent or more in paid time; while eight had done less than 40 percent in paid time. It seems there was some juggling to account for time.

Yeah well the time that has been spent on this I've sort of removed that from the equation on our data system, reporting system, taken it out of the equation and I just keep doing that until they tell me different.

Having research on the agency's agenda was seen as very useful to one group:

It's something that's been really valuable for us in doing ... actually having this in the agency's strategic plan. The management or the board actually says, 'This agency is growing the body of knowledge in the field.' If that's part of what you believe you're here to do and it's written down then it's hard to not argue against ... you doing it.

In one agency there was disagreement over its research protocols, which created confusion and lost time for the researchers. In another, the management group, previously supportive, was almost entirely replaced by new management not interested in or committed to the research. This had caused considerable hardship for the group, which was left 'struggling'. The fact that the

teams conceived and developed their own research was seen to be making it interesting, "Because it all has meaning and purpose."

Apart from the offer of help at the outset, GRIP had no strategy for building or accessing support from the agency before the start of the programme; and this was recognised as a gap that would need attention in any future model. During the World Café in the August workshop, strategies for developing acceptance and a better research culture were discussed in some depth. Participants observed that either a 'top-down' or a 'bottom-up' approach could make this happen, and acknowledged their own role and influence in making sure it did. Using their agencies' mandates, they could make a case for research as 'real work' and as an investment for clients. Some considered it unfortunate that management were not included in early discussions, and not asked to make a commitment to allowing time for GRIP participation.

Some participants regarded it important that management should build research involvement into the performance appraisal scheme: "Participation should be included in merit progression."

4.4.2 Maintaining the motivation

Motivation and enthusiasm were severely challenged as the year progressed, under pressure from workload and other commitments; but the high attendance and participation was maintained, and eight out of nine groups remained in GRIP. For a few, it was about personal commitment, which they spoke of in terms of excitement, passion and inspiration. For others, the motivation to continue came from a sense of obligation to the group, the participants and management, and to some extent to the GRIP team.

It was recognised that constant attention to the research was needed to keep it alive, as was comprehensive forward planning. Christmas holidays saw a dip in motivation. One leader estimated that her team deserved eight out of 10 for motivation at the beginning of the project in April and two out of 10 near Christmas.

4.4.3 Time management

It was difficult to calculate how much time GRIP took up in the participants' busy work schedules. One team leader estimated about eight hours a month, out of a typically 60-hour working week. This, however, would

have varied from team to team, and some individuals managed it better than others: “People leave meetings early or don’t turn up because work overwhelms them.”

After the April workshop, 20 out of 24 respondents cited time or, more specifically, workload responsibilities as a foreseen hindrance to getting the research completed, one pointing out that it would be an issue of making choices between urgent (workload) and important (research) tasks:

I had a family meeting and I really had to go to it and I had to prioritise and say, “Well, in fact the research doesn’t come before this particular piece of work” ... because it wasn’t going to happen at any other time. So there is a tension and there’s times when you daren’t say I’ve just got to do this instead. That’s the nature of working in an acute environment.

Another noted that in an acute environment, they were “...managing tension constantly. Clinical work must always come first”.

Finding time to meet was a huge challenge for some participants, especially the few doing shift work. One consistently successful strategy for time management, adopted by some teams, but not all, was booking all meetings in advance. It was noted by the mentors how much more effective this had been for all concerned. One or two teams booked out half or even whole days, finding “a block of time and a few hours to go at it without restrictions” the most productive strategy. Getting people to carry out tasks between meetings didn’t always work, with competing pressures ‘side-tracking’ participants. Doing much of the work collectively at the team meetings was an effective solution for some groups. Being held to account by the programme manager added another set of deadlines which, while probably not helping comfort levels, seemed to work for some groups, confirming the importance of the leader’s role.

At certain times of the year maintaining the research became more difficult, especially as Christmas approached. Some agencies are quieter over school holidays, but that is when their staff take leave. Managing the research project over a shorter period – “possibly shorter workshops closer together” – was suggested as a strategy to maintain motivation.

It is clear from the feedback that individuals and teams found their own ways to manage time.

Some found ways to expand the available time, while others preserved the time they had or diary-managed it. The groups that managed the time most effectively were those with good planning skills and a fixed timeline. Time issues were also related to the size of the project and the number of people on board. The more manageable the topic and the team, the easier it was in general to manage the time available.

4.4.4 The learning process

Learning occurred at various rates, depending on prior knowledge and receptivity. Some of the less experienced researchers pleaded for things to slow down a bit, or recognised that they would not take everything on board the first time round:

There’s only capacity for so much information and thinking and processing and then I think you just need a second time to actually see what [you’ve learnt], like I think if you’re talking to us maybe middle of next year, you might get something different.

One wrote: “Words like qualitative, quantitative mean nothing to us ‘newbie’s’ [beginners]. I am grateful for the handouts to help support this learning.”

At the August workshop people were asked to indicate what they felt they were learning through GRIP. A resounding 24 out of 24 believed that the personal learning experience was worth the time they were putting in; and 23 felt that the experience was increasing their curiosity about practice. Asked about how their learning had increased, they indicated gains in the areas listed in Table 3.

Table 3: Areas of knowledge increase reported by respondents

Areas of knowledge increase	Frequency
Listening to diverse opinions and ideas	24
Thinking outside the square/laterally	21
Questioning practice	21
Step-by-step research process	20
Being reflexive rather than reactive	20
Making time for non-caseload work	19

Other learning areas mentioned were leading a team, openness to new learning and views, personal and team process and a new understanding of the impact of diverse realities and perceptions on research.

At the final workshop, each participant was asked to rate themselves on a scale of one to four ('not at all' to 'extremely') on three matters: how knowledgeable they now felt as a practitioner researcher; how mindful of research they were; and how worthwhile their time and effort in GRIP had been. While two newer participants rated themselves low on all three questions, the others did better. Nine felt knowledgeable 'to some extent' and eight felt 'mostly' knowledgeable, while, wisely, none said 'totally'. However, seven felt 'totally' mindful of research, and eight felt mindful of it 'to some extent' or 'mostly'. Seven felt their time and effort 'totally' worthwhile and six 'mostly'; and only four said 'not at all' or 'to some extent'.

We were interested in understanding the things that contributed to the completion of the research. They were asked: "What is the most important thing you have learnt during your time in GRIP?" There were 10 responses about research skills, specifically or generally. Five people cited the importance of planning, using time well and/or gaining agency support to do the work; and four mentioned the importance of working as a team. Four people said they had discovered that it was enjoyable, straightforward and manageable and/or that they were capable of doing it.

4.4.5 Language and culture

A large number of participants were working across languages and cultures. For many, English was a second language and the culture in which GRIP was operating was not their own. The Māori, Pasifika, Chinese and ethnic teams worked predominantly within their own cultural groups and the Chinese team carried out all their research in Chinese, translating questionnaires and some of the data into English for the purposes of sharing it with their mentors and others. It was not always easy to understand the cultural precepts of each party, and mentoring was potentially fraught with traps for the unsuspecting or insensitive. However, this could be true also within the same culture.

While all the studies involved aspects of cultural difference requiring an understanding or appreciation of others' world-views, several of the studies were specifically related to developing a cultural basis for

practice. The Chinese group was keen to hear from their Chinese clients how the US-developed mental health programme they had been using could be adapted to Chinese concepts. The Pasifika group explored the way they used their own cultural concepts in their work. The ethnic group was looking at ways in which they could adapt men's domestic violence group programmes to attract and retain ethnic men more effectively. The hospital social workers were looking at what worked for each culture (Māori, Pacific and European) in family meetings at the hospital.

Experience and abilities varied enormously also, as recognised by the participants themselves. When they also had to translate research into another culture and sometimes another language, the challenge must have been enormous.

4.5 GRIP resources

4.5.1 Workshops

Workshop attendance, although not in any way obligatory, was maintained at a good level throughout the year, which indicated interest in and satisfaction from them. Suggestions for improvements to workshops were collected in feedback sheets and, where they seemed feasible and useful and did not conflict with others' feedback, they were implemented at subsequent events. It was impossible to keep everybody happy, however. Some people found speakers went too fast, others too slow. Some enjoyed time spent catching up, others found it a waste of time. The timing of subject matter was also difficult, since groups were advancing at different speeds, but it had been agreed early in the project that the workshops would be for learning generally about research, whereas the mentoring was more concerned with the specific research projects and their progress.

Feedback from the workshops was generally overwhelmingly positive. There was consistent approval for the presentations and learning, the refreshments/kai, the focus on the projects and time spent as a team. The value was perceived in terms of learning – "I think everybody's learnt heaps, I think the workshops have been really useful" – and also of enjoyment and support: "I think people have loved coming to the workshops, they've loved being fed and being nurtured and being supported."

By far the most useful part of the workshops was seen to be the guest speakers, on which there appears to have been a consensus. Contact with real researchers – “He’s just an ordinary person like us” – was appreciated almost as much as the information imparted by the speakers. Many commented on the workshops’ value in allowing focus on the project and on the team, finding this both profitable and pleasurable. One of the main benefits of the workshops was their motivating power factor – something not necessarily expected by the GRIP team. The workshops served the additional function of providing motivation and networking, as well as skill-building. Asked at the end of one workshop how their motivation had changed through the day, all responded that it was higher than it had been on arrival. This motivation was apparently difficult to maintain between workshops, however: “... and then yeah, work takes over again so it has been really hard”.

The variation in subject matter, research type and progress between projects made it difficult to actually do a lot of ‘work-shopping’ in the workshops. But we used various strategies to try to focus and bind the teams: regular news or update sessions, the occasional brainstorm or small-group discussion, panel discussions with the speakers and, of course, the World Café were all seen as useful.

4.5.2 Mentoring

The five mentors (six including a cultural mentor brought in to support Māori team members as needed) all went about mentoring in their own ways, so the groups experienced varying styles of mentoring. There was a general understanding of the role, but it was accepted that different personalities would interpret it differently. It was always clear, however, that it was not a supervisory role; that the practitioner-researchers owned their projects and made their own decisions.

The teams were distributed between the university groups, who decided how they would manage the mentoring. The three Massey GRIP team members worked in pairs, feeling that the groups might benefit more from input from two people; while the University of Auckland members each took two groups, working alone and consulting each other. There is no data as to whether the participants preferred one of these models to another.

In the June workshop feedback, when all groups had had their first mentoring session, all but one of 27 people said they had found it ‘largely’ or ‘totally’ useful. Finding times for the sessions was the main issue, making clear the need to set meeting times for the whole year in advance. The feedback indicated a number of benefits from mentoring. Some were related to the mentors’ research experience, which enabled them to provide advice and structure and resolve issues:

I think that the mentors have actually given us very direct advice about the research methods (and) methodology because this kind of research, at least for me, it’s quite new. So I really learnt much from the process about the method.

...it has kept some structure and progress, it’s kept everything on track I think in a lot of ways.

Other benefits perceived by the practitioners had to do with the mentors’ commitment to the projects and their involvement with the practitioners’ struggles and achievements: “... just so committed, never faulted, and always been available”; “...they’ve been very encouraging. Extremely encouraging”.

I’ve known that if I ever needed him to come and see us or whatever, all I’ve needed was to contact him ... he made himself available but he wasn’t pushy or anything like that, it just felt really comfortable.

As was expected, a number of shortcomings were also identified in the mentoring. Some felt they could have done with more challenging or even more direct instruction; and others expressed views on the impact of the mentoring on them:

Has mentoring been people who can come alongside and encourage and keep the momentum going or is it people who actually come in with a level of expertise that the group doesn’t have and shares that expertise to lift our capacity and I’m still not sure what the mentoring group’s idea was of that.

I think at times we needed to hear, ‘That is not going to work. Our experience tells us that that is not going to work.’ They’ve got far more experience than anyone here and we would really have enjoyed to hear comments like that instead of ‘You’re doing really well and you’re just about there but think about those questions’.

4.5.3 The process

For many projects the process of being involved in GRIP was important:

Having mentors, having workshops, having access to that sort of emotional support and expert knowledge has just been unbelievably helpful, phenomenal really.

The other thing is what chance would we get to hear some of these great speakers otherwise? We would not have the resources or the sort of right situation to be able to invite them out or even to know who to invite, so from that point of view I think we've benefited hugely.

The marvellously rich and varied range of people, knowledge and perspectives offered enormous potential for cross-fertilisation. This happened both within teams (during group meetings and mentoring) and across teams (at the workshops and symposium). One of the hopes we had of the GRIP initiative was that it would allow peer-mentoring and peer support, and in this respect it certainly did not disappoint. One team member said, "I've particularly learnt from the perspectives of the other members of the group and it certainly makes me think a great deal about my own."

It was also a challenge to the GRIP team, to provide material of value to everyone present. For many, much of the material covered at the workshops was revision, while others struggled with new concepts and, at times,

information overload: "We're such beginners [that it needed to be] even more basic, even more ABC than it has been." Another said, "It's just raising my awareness around research and all the ethical components to it and all this other stuff, methodology and, you see, it's all new to me." The diversity was therefore also a complexity that needed to be managed, especially as regards conceptual and linguistic frameworks.

People from non-dominant cultures had some juggling to do:

Sometimes I'm thinking just Māori so just trying to adjust or bring in, to add to a Pākehā perspective on how to do research and stuff like that ... so it's just sort of raising my awareness.

For quite a number, English as their second language posed additional challenges, as they had to grasp research lingo in a different language. The patience and respect participants showed for each other was impressive. One said after an early workshop, "I really understand that the group is diverse and that we had to accommodate all levels of understanding and appreciation of the material presented."

Each team had its own struggles for its own reasons, be they workload, group dynamics, agency politics or restructuring. All were overwhelmed by work, and it would be presumptuous to attempt to measure or compare their busyness. But all of them achieved outcomes of value in their own ways.

5. ASSESSING THE OUTCOMES OF GRIP

This section explores the findings regarding the outcomes achieved. The focus is on:

- > learning from the research
- > outcomes for social service agencies
- > increased research-mindedness
- > results from the practice projects.

5.1 Learning from the research

Various factors contributed to the learning by individuals and practice teams. Most projects stayed with GRIP until the end, presenting at the symposium and submitting a research report. Most of the team members attended the workshops and engaged actively in the mentoring. This in itself was a major achievement, given that the participants were frontline practitioners during very busy times and often with limited support. They made the most of the opportunity, and committed themselves to completing the projects. In fact, most teams conducted a literature review and/or planned and conducted empirical research. And the teams stayed together and worked together despite difficulties created by factors such as group dynamics, staff turnover and practice obstacles.

Some groups could not make best use of the support offered; some lacked team support, effectively becoming one-person teams; others could not complete their projects in time, and one did not really get beyond the aspiration to collect information, although it remained committed to the process and the outcomes. We cannot ignore the evidence that some groups and individuals were less suited to the purposes of GRIP (ie, that a group of practitioners should plan, implement and report an empirical project or address practice questions). Learning from the research was mainly in the following areas:

- > learning about the research process
- > professional development for individuals
- > improved communication and understanding about practice topics
- > team learning and making connections with others.

5.1.1 The participants

It seemed that all participants learnt a good deal about doing research, and of course the beginners learnt a lot more than the others, as they had so much more to learn. They cannot be expected to be fully-fledged researchers, but they all have the potential to become much-needed research resources for their agencies and, in some instances, for their cultures. The feedback consistently indicated that they enjoyed GRIP and that they gained confidence and enthusiasm from it. Research has been demystified and as a direct or indirect result, some practitioners have changed jobs or enrolled for further study. Members of some teams are presenting findings at conferences or preparing articles for journals. A few of them regarded GRIP as an opportunity for professional development.

A great many of them have indicated that their critical thinking and time-management skills have been enhanced, in ways that are reflected in their practice: "...I am very aware now of who should be there (for intervention). It's just those little things that I never used to think about before ..."; and "...when I think how [GRIP] has changed my practice, well nearly every single thing I'm involved with now – I think differently about my decisions." There is also recognition of the centrality of research to practice: "I've realised if research is part of it, then you have to, it has to be part of your [workload] formula."

5.1.2 The teams

Working in teams during GRIP improved communication about and understanding of the practice topics and enabled team learning and the opportunity to make connections with others. But there had been frustrations too, when things were not as simple as they looked, and team leaders at times felt they were 'spoon feeding' their teams. Team members asked to devise a questionnaire were surprised by the attention to detail and care required to come up with questions that would elicit meaningful data. Reading academic literature was a huge challenge for some, and they would put it off constantly, despite pressure from the team. They also struggled to critique it. Huge progress was reported in this area, however, as was clearly evident from the feedback received and from the faces of some of the learners.

Watching team members learn was a positive experience. One experienced researcher enjoyed

the opportunity of sharing knowledge with the team, resisting the temptation to go ahead and do things without explaining them. Two team leaders enjoyed, eventually, the experience of teaching team members to contribute to their literature reviews, after an initial struggle. Another team leader felt strongly that a second piece of research would be much easier to organise, as team members would have developed the skills and the confidence.

5.2 Outcomes for social service agencies

During the interviews, well before the end of the programme, practice learning and benefits were already recognised and some of it was even being applied in the workplace. The main areas of benefit for agencies include:

- > increased practice awareness
- > ongoing practice research
- > enhanced relationships and networks.

5.2.1 Ongoing practice research

One group found loopholes in a tool they had been using for some time, and felt they had increased practice awareness and confidence and engendered discussion about research among management. Another group, which was engaged in data mining, was confident that a side effect of their research would be improvements to their recording systems. They were also developing a coding system so that the information they had mined would be more evident in future:

I think this work is directly going to inform how we manage files for the future in terms of clearly recording ... even how our files are structured physically ... it's not until you come and do something like this that you actually realise it would be really helpful if certain things were in certain places all the time...

Another team had set up a new client group, and made changes to their programme as a result of the interviews they conducted. One group, part of a national network, felt their work would influence them locally and establish a model nationally. The team leader said, "This gives us the actual support that we need to make those decisions, the distribution of national funding and personnel. So it's unique in the sense that it is very

specific to being able to make an accurate decision on what are the needs in our organisation to address." The results would "set the direction of the organisation" for three or four years. Some participants saw the benefits in terms of changes to be made within agencies to support research, others in terms of obtaining funding: "That is the one thing that I have learned. In New Zealand you have to give research evidence." The longer-term benefits for practice and the value of capturing practice knowledge were also mentioned.

5.2.2 Relationships and networks

Peer learning across teams has reinforced, developed or reinvigorated allegiance to the wider profession and awareness of its role and possibilities. Organisations (includes managers and board members) have become more aware of and committed to practitioner research. Research budgets are being established in some agencies, and others are incorporating research activity into professional development plans. GRIP also helped validate cultural approaches to research and practice. Groups learnt from other teams and workshop presenters about issues of bicultural or multicultural practice and its relationship to practice research. One respondent described the value of research figuratively, suggesting it had frozen a period of time for leisurely examination – a rare luxury in practice.

Many of the projects are continuing (see Table 4). A second phase of some projects is being conducted, while others have conceived new projects as a result of their involvement in GRIP. In four groups where the agencies' management was well represented there was considerable enthusiasm for continuing the research, mostly in extensions of the 2006 projects. Others hoped this would happen in their agencies, but thought they would probably be driving the research alone or in some isolation. One agency had a new CEO with a commitment to hearing the clients' voice but others, despite interest from management or individual enthusiasm, were probably too stressed or under-resourced to be in a position to maintain a research focus in the current climate. Other groups focused on getting the results published or disseminated in other ways before turning to further research.

At the final workshop, several questions were put to 25 of the participants about further research. Not all of the participants answered all of the questions. Twelve people said they would attempt to do another group

research project, four said they would not. People were divided as regards their confidence in managing without GRIP, only nine saying they could, and eight that they could not. Asked where else they would find support, many appeared to be thinking broadly across all their resources – community and cultural groups, university links, colleagues, friends. Just two cited management.

Asked what they would do differently, the majority talked about better management of research time, making the research more of a priority and allocating time to it, keeping the research small, reading more and writing earlier. Being involved from the beginning and involving other people were also mentioned. Some useful suggestions were made as to how the exercise could have been improved: more emphasis on securing organisational support and establishing good reporting structures to “keep the project alive” and “generalise the learning”; and a longer timeframe to slow the pace. Worthwhile observations were made about academic and workplace perspectives. For some, these differences may have created tension, but for others the alternatives to their usual perspectives provided new networks and a sense of collegiality:

I think that was partly about creating a stronger professional community of social work in Auckland which is about the academic and the practitioner communities being stronger together ... we're going to need highly diverse, some highly effective skilled practitioners and the academic and the professional communities need to create mechanisms of supporting all of that and some of these GRIP mentoring models I think represent one of the ways of doing it.

5.3 Research-mindedness

At an earlier workshop, people were asked about the importance or potential impact of the research being undertaken by GRIP members – on agency-, Auckland-, New Zealand-wide and overseas scales. Most respondents (15 out of 21) could imagine a large or 'total' impact on their own agencies and Auckland social services, 10 out of 22 envisaged such an impact on a national scale, but only six out of 19 could imagine GRIP's impact traversing the ocean. Some of the

comments reflected individuals' support for practitioner research, whilst others highlighted potential barriers, including the need for a paradigm shift among social workers regarding research in practice, and lack of collegial support or encouragement for practitioners to engage in research. This vision of the impact of the research projects indicated to the GRIP team a mind shift; an awareness of the value of research and potentially an enhanced research-mindedness. In our opinion, even the discussion about the importance of the research added to the ongoing dialogue that encouraged research-mindedness.

5.4 Results from the practice projects

Not just writing and talk resulted from the practice projects, but also real changes in practice, which is an exciting outcome from GRIP. It is difficult to determine which groups have developed useful findings for their clients. While some studies were preliminary, delving into conceptual issues or the reasons behind practical issues, the learning from these projects was seen as particularly advantageous, bringing a deeper understanding of the dynamics between social workers and their clients. Even a single pilot interview, which was as far as one beleaguered team managed to get, gave a good indication of desirable action, should the agency or other colleagues pick it up. All the studies have opened such possibilities, and most have spurred ongoing curiosity. The discussion of the projects and the findings from the research have been reported in the groups' own project reports (see Appendix 2). Table 4 provides a brief overview of the main findings from the projects and potential initiatives.

Table 4 makes it clear that benefits can be derived from the practice projects – some obvious and others less so. The significant impacts on practice from the projects collectively can be summarised as follows:

- > Direct changes for programme delivery (including changes to policy or funding).
- > Changes to recording processes.
- > Reconceptualisation of practice areas.
- > Changes to or affirmation of practice models.
- > Critical reflection on practice.

Table 4: Overview of the main findings and potential initiatives from the practice projects

Group	Main findings	Potential initiatives
Bo-Ai-She	Information for development of the 'WRAP' programme for use with Chinese mental health patients and their families.	Ongoing evaluation to be conducted. Evaluability of programme enhanced. Ongoing dissemination of results.
Waipareira Pasifika	Articulated Pasifika concepts useful in working with families. Facilitated understanding between and amongst Māori and Pacific staff in working with families.	Ongoing dissemination of results and plans for follow-up discussions.
Shakti Family Settlement and Social Services	Useful information from men's group facilitators from various cultures about cultural concepts of and approaches to domestic violence in working with men.	Plans to consult ethnic communities to understand better how ethnic men could be approached.
ADHB Auckland City Hospital	Better understanding of the impact of cultural difference and the importance of culturally appropriate knowledge for family meetings.	Ongoing analysis of interview data. Implementation of results in practice. Ongoing dissemination planned.
NSCSS	A dataset on the profile of a huge number of social services on the North Shore.	Focus groups with selected agencies as a phase 2 of the project. Ongoing data analysis.
Family Works Northern	Identified issues to be evaluated in the context of working with Māori families.	Potential to develop an evaluation model for further projects.
SAFE	Established reasons that clients do not complete programmes offered.	Ongoing dissemination. Attention to systems for data capture. Address appropriate areas to increase completion rates.
ADHB – Epsom Day	Preliminary thoughts on the impact on social workers using an assessment tool to screen for domestic violence.	Plan focus groups with staff and interviews with clients.

Many of the groups are or will be involved in dissemination of the results of their projects. This involves a wide range of follow-up activities with significant potential for impact on practice:

- > Presentations at national and international professional conferences.
- > In-house presentations to staff and peers within and across disciplines.
- > Feedback to managers and board members, funders and clients and consumers.
- > Disseminating information to community agencies and professional networks.
- > Public campaigns.

As one practitioner noted in an interview, it may be difficult to decide upon the best channel for dissemination:

...ethically with research you should get it out there; but do you get it out to the academic community or do you get it out to the practitioner community, which are not necessarily the same groups? You need to put it out in a format that's best received.

It is clear from the preceding discussion that GRIP made possible various kinds of learning by individual participants and practice teams. It also had outcomes for the social service agencies represented by the practice teams, including increased awareness of research in practice, actual ongoing practice research and enhanced relationships and networks. In particular the range of real changes in practice (Table 4) is an exciting outcome. Some of the results from these practice projects are more obvious and measurable than others, but all are valid.

6. REFLECTIONS ON PRACTITIONER RESEARCH

This section situates the findings of the previous section in a broader context, exploring their implications and relating them to the literature surveyed in earlier sections.

6.1 The impact of research

The core questions in assessing the impact of research concerned the impact of the GRIP programme overall, the impact of the team research projects and whether the process and outcomes of individual projects could be separated. Individuals and teams on the whole enjoyed the GRIP process and working on their research. It would also appear that individuals and teams derived significant learning from the GRIP process and their projects (see 5.1). Beyond personal satisfaction and learning, however, the longer-term and more substantial outcomes and impacts of participation need to be considered. Part 5.2.2 outlined some indications of changes in attitudes and behaviours, but it is unclear whether they are likely to be maintained in the longer term.

Longer-term shifts in behaviour (in individuals, teams and organisations) are typically accepted as the rationale for large-scale research, regardless of whether influence is direct and instrumental or indirect and involves broader reconceptualisation. Parts 5.3 and 5.4 discussed the ways the GRIP process and the findings of the team projects have begun to seep into practice. Such a move from satisfaction and learning to changes in attitudes, beliefs and behaviours will improve the well being of services users, their families and communities. The impacts from the GRIP programme and from the individual projects are detailed in the table below.

Table 5: Impacts from GRIP

Research impact	GRIP programme	Individual projects
Was satisfaction expressed?	Yes	Generally, yes
Did perceived learning take place?	Yes	Yes
Are there changes to attitudes and beliefs?	Yes, but short-term	Yes, some, but short-term
Are there changes to behaviour and practice?	Yet to be determined	Yet to be determined

The tendency in academic research is to confine recognition of impacts to longer-term, clear-cut changes in behaviour. Such ‘big-bang’ impacts are unlikely to be seen in practitioners’ projects – although that possibility cannot be ruled out altogether. Expecting research impacts of an academic standard from the current workplace is asking a great deal of practitioners.

6.2 Participants and their projects

6.2.1 Diversity of participation

When planning participation in the GRIP programme we deliberately sought to be as inclusive as possible of projects and settings, to maximise learning from the project. The aim of the GRIP programme was to explore various settings. GRIP brought together a diversity of individual practitioners, research teams and practice settings to constitute the learning set. This range of participants (which included diverse cultural backgrounds), teams and settings, in turn, produced very heterogeneous projects and processes:

- > Participants brought different levels of knowledge and research experience to the GRIP process, and research skills were uneven among and across the research teams.
- > Teams varied from being pre-formed cohesive groups, to groups constructed for the purposes of GRIP where relationships and cohesion had to be established during the project.
- > Settings for practice included statutory, non-statutory and voluntary settings that drew across a number of fields of practice: children and families; therapy for offenders; mental health; women’s health; and community development.
- > Cultural diversity was evident, with the participants drawn from Māori, European, Pacific, Asian, Middle-Eastern and African communities, and the organisations that participated in GRIP which delivered services to specific cultural groups.

While our pilot was undertaken in Auckland, the social work backgrounds and settings represented mirror the diversity that is found in New Zealand social work generally. Many of the participating organisations were relatively small organisations operating from small sites, which again is representative of the experience of much of the social services workforce nationally.

Although our sample of eight participating projects is relatively small, we suggest tentatively that research

teams attempting to work across organisations and across sites encounter the most difficulties. Teams with members working part-time (or as volunteers) and away from a central site may face additional barriers to collaborative working. Working in a close team environment offered advantages: members could exchange views and discuss the research day-to-day, and previous relationships provided a basis for research collaboration and teamwork. Despite the project teams being formed in many different ways, the experience of GRIP suggested that they all have the potential to succeed. There were instances where effective communication ensured the success of even those projects hampered by cross-site working.

6.2.2 From leadership to custodianship

Within the teams, effective 'custodianship' of the project proved important in maintaining motivation and completing the project successfully. We say custodianship because in each group there was at least one person charged with keeping the project on track, who typically undertook functions including establishing and energising the team, passing on information, facilitating the group and organising meetings. Custodianship is distinguished from leadership, because there was no single person guiding the process and 'leading' in the traditional sense of this term. The concept of custodianship recognises that the team has ownership. Without this prerequisite no leadership could ensure the successful completion of a project.

The people we perceive as custodians were not simply the most experienced researchers, nor were they always line managers in organisations. On the contrary, some line managers deliberately allowed another member of the team to take responsibility for the research. GRIP's initial aim was to have practitioner teams undertake the projects, and the custodians were not necessarily those who undertook all or even most of the research work personally. Rather, custodians had the capacity to energise other team members and ensure that they contributed to the progress and completion of the research. People who proved effective in this role showed the ability to resolve problems such as staff turnover, changes of personnel and delays in progress resulting from ethical review processes or team members' personal crises.

6.2.3 Group processes

We believe that sharing the workload of the research project was a key to success, since the project added to participants' already busy working weeks. While the membership of some groups remained constant through the GRIP process, other projects had a high turnover as members moved to new job opportunities. Some teams were eventually reduced to one member, and individuals took on the responsibility of conducting and completing projects with varying degrees of success.

Group dynamics, processes and rapport were apparently good in most of the teams. In some instances a lack of group ownership or communication hampered progress. A custodian with a particular commitment to GRIP and investment in the process was not of itself enough to ensure completion. Success factors for custodianship included securing buy-in and understanding from teams at the beginning, establishing openness and building trust and commitment to inclusiveness. Teams where a sense of group identity, mission and ownership were clearly present made better progress than others.

6.2.4 Completing the research

A key question that arises is why some projects were completed with relative ease when others faced greater difficulties. Finding enough time to complete research was common to all the groups, since research competed for scarce time (Fook, 2003; Sidell et al, 1996). Some groups appeared to have support that enabled them to progress their activities. Groups that were passionate about their topics of research and managed to maintain enthusiasm benefited from an interplay of individual and organisational factors (for example, a small allocation of work hours to spend on the project engendered a sense of accountability, promoting commitment to the GRIP process and was encouraging effective time management). We discuss issues of time resources more fully under 6.3 (Workplace) and 6.4 (Professions).

Each group of researchers had its own distinctive stock of resources and skills, drawn from within and across organisations. In important respects GRIP provided the research teams with an impetus and common purpose to harness their aspirations for research. While endless

research plans may be hatched and much research pursued for a long time to then fizzle to nothing, GRIP provided a framework and timeline that carried the research from conception to completion. The GRIP deadlines focused teams' attention and energies and provided a clear end-point. In this sense, GRIP was simply the 'right initiative at the right time' to use the enthusiasm, interest, skills and ideas that already existed in organisations and practice settings.

Projects where team members had a relatively low stock of skills and knowledge still demonstrated a capacity to succeed. Some teams, however, did not reach their goals or did not cohere to the end of the process. A number of lessons emerge from the experiences of the groups that encountered such difficulties:

- > the importance of practice teams starting with a shared agenda and interests
- > the key importance of communication within the team
- > custodians as facilitators
- > that the scale and scope of projects must be adjusted according to the available research skills
- > the need for teams to recognise limitations and be willing to ask for help
- > the need for collective loyalty to and ownership of the project

6.3 GRIP resources and strategies

Whilst not wishing to discount the barriers and difficulties that practitioners often face in conducting research (including among others time, motivation, skills and isolation – see Fuller and Petch, 1995), the success of the GRIP programme suggests that under particular circumstances they can be surmounted. It is important to recognise that the GRIP process and the research design were not carried out under laboratory conditions. The approach was more akin to action research, in that we revised our input according to the expressed and perceived needs of the participants.

The fact that GRIP was a funded pilot programme affected the expectations of individual projects and the GRIP team. On the programme side, there was no doubt a 'halo' effect from participants' awareness they were involved in a pilot development, which would culminate with a symposium and 'proceedings' where

they and their research would be very visible. From the GRIP team's perspective, the programme employed a very capable project manager whose skills and commitment helped ensure that the projects were given as much opportunity for success as possible within the limitations of budget and time. The GRIP team also had its own requirements for reporting to funders, with associated timelines and expectations.

The GRIP team experienced a tension between the need to maintain a 'light-handed' approach towards the projects so as to learn about practice-based research, and their wish to ensure that the projects all achieved their potential. While we had reporting responsibilities, we also wanted the projects to succeed for themselves, and to be able to tell a positive story as well as one of frustration, dissipated energy and fragile emotions. Our bottom line was that wherever possible we wanted each team member to have a successful research experience, and at least an aspect of each project to be presented at the symposium. All these considerations helped carry the research along, and such conditions might not hold should GRIP be replicated. Despite all the investment by projects and the GRIP team, success was never guaranteed: the project ran to GRIP timelines but relied on shared energies. There was no assurance that the desired outcomes would eventuate.

GRIP showed that practitioner research can be undertaken with some measure of outside support, such as mentoring, deadlines and constant re-focusing of team energies (McCrae et al, 2005). How did GRIP contribute towards this outcome, and what can we therefore learn from GRIP? The open recruitment process we adopted resulted in diverse groups, with different needs and abilities. Flexibility was needed, as was recognition of the diversity of the agencies, cultural perspectives and fields of practice represented. At the start we could not predict the pace of progress and the amount of support that would be needed, but had to feel our way as the programme developed. We monitored and reviewed constantly, and soon recognised that one size did not fit all; resources at the workshops did not always match the needs and requirements of the participants. In many ways the diversity of the groups became a barrier to the effective use of the workshops and guest speakers. With hindsight it would have been possible to do far more with the workshops if all the participants had been at a similar point in their understanding and knowledge of

research. Bringing together teams from similar fields of practice might also have had some advantages. Participants, as individuals and within teams, also developed their own personal and organisational agendas as the research progressed, often diverging from the intentions of GRIP, and these divergences were difficult to anticipate and counter (Sidell et al, 1996). It was fortunate that GRIP could offer more customised mentoring to the individual groups as a way of addressing the diversity of interests present (Klasen and Clutterbuck, 2002; Noam and Fiore, 2004; Rhodes et al, 2006; Zerwekh and Claborn, 2006).

6.3.1 A framework of opportunity

Upon reflection, while the GRIP programme was envisaged as a series of inputs into individual projects (workshops, seminars, written resources), our experience proved otherwise. Although these resources were provided during the project, the major needs of individual projects proved to be time management, forward planning and maintaining motivation. Although the GRIP team did indeed offer input and advice on research skills and conduct, our overall contribution is perhaps more appropriately seen as the provision of a framework of opportunity for projects. Because GRIP had a finite life of 15 months rather than a more open-ended commitment, project milestones, workshop dates and the final symposium were very effective markers for teams to benchmark progress, and thus helped them optimise their ideas, skills and energies. The vast majority of project teams felt that without these commitments the research might not have been completed, certainly not within the projected timeframe. Although not all projects reached these milestones or fulfilled these commitments consistently, as carrots and sticks they were nonetheless recognised as important for the completion of the project.

Occasionally, inputs into projects proved useful but not for intended reasons. Workshops, for example, were an important support, not so much because they upskilled teams, but as a means of holding groups accountable, and as opportunities for groups to re-energise and to spend dedicated time on the research topic. Similarly, we envisaged that academic mentoring would be crucial, and that knowledge transfer and guidance would be its principal mentor functions. The role of the mentor, however, proved to be multidimensional, challenging assumptions, offering moral support and expert technical support and sometimes all of

these. While the mentoring approach developed as the programme evolved, as academic mentors we experienced a tension between our funded role, which involved 'letting go' of processes and following them wherever they went, and a desire to influence the direction of decisions. Important outcomes were the learning, support and camaraderie that developed within individual research teams and across the research teams when they met at the workshops. Whilst this was expected, these processes – particularly the peer mentoring within teams – developed a dynamic of their own, and added to the framework of opportunity as practitioners maintained commitment because of their sense of responsibility to peers and mentors.

At its inception GRIP was intended as a partnership between the research projects and the GRIP team. This would involve a shared mission, shared ownership and on our part, responsiveness to feedback, wherever possible changing the direction of GRIP according to the wishes and needs of the teams. While we wrestled with our own reluctance to let go of processes (because of the reporting requirements) getting the teams to enter into a partnership and to recognise their own resources and expertise took time. It is important to recognise that even action research and participatory action research take place in the contexts of existing power relations (Reason and Bradbury, 2001). During the programme we increasingly recognised that we had to promote partnership proactively, and some measure of it was achieved through: a World Café session at the August workshop (see Table 2); efforts during workshops to gain feedback and share ownership; and joint discussion of and planning for the symposium.

The intention was for projects to be provided with culturally appropriate support as needed throughout the programme. At the outset it was made clear to groups that culturally appropriate research was not just a formula, but required them to reflect and review, and to consider the resources they held individually, as teams, and in their organisations. Whilst at times specific cultural expertise was required, there was a broader sense of cultural 'permission' and affirmation. Such support allowed them to maintain a belief that what they were doing had value.

Working in teams had some major strengths as well as some drawbacks. People work at different paces, and may contribute to a project in very different ways. Team members provided different resources to the research

process and to team deliberations, such as motivation, organisational ability, specific research skills and presentation skills. An issue that inevitably arises during team research is that not everyone achieves the same level of competency by the completion of the project. A team approach may result in deficits in particular research skills and understandings. The research did not seek to explore individual research capacities and competencies. Even so, recognition on the part of individual participants of areas where they need improvement and assistance is itself a benefit.

6.4 Workplace context

The successful completion of a research project can be facilitated by appropriate workplace support, including support from management and boards. The programme furnished examples of projects that illustrated this in both positive and less than positive ways. For example, one team, with the support of management, was able to set aside occasional days for data collection and analysis. These shared times of research activity also proved valuable for building morale. The boards of this particular organisation and some of the others also affirmed the research activities and conveyed their belief that such developments were worthwhile and should be supported. Given that research is frequently a marginalised process in many organisations (Shaw, 2005) such practical and emotional support for the teams was extremely welcome. Conversely, some teams felt that support was not forthcoming, or was being withheld. The implication was that research had to be undertaken in personal time and was not a core part of professional social work.

The role of the employing organisation is important if research projects by practitioners and practitioner research in general are to be nurtured. Rather than situating problems and solutions at the level of individual practitioners and their teams, it is important to recognise the responsibility of organisations for the management of time and workloads. Research and related forms of professional development must be valued at the organisational level. In many organisations core activities, defined as allocating caseloads, seeing clients and 'getting work done', trumped everything else. There is a need for practitioner research to be seen as a constituent of real work, and for job descriptions and professional development to include

space for it. The total contribution of social work should not be reduced merely to tasks; practitioners need to be situated in activities and a knowledge base that embrace practitioner research.

Organisational drivers for research include:

- > people (to give support, to help build teams and to encourage networking of resources within agencies)
- > procedures (organisations need to build into their employees' performance appraisals or development plans the expectation of critical reflection on practice, and the recognition of researchable questions, if not necessarily of engagement in research)
- > systems (the supervision model is well established in social work and can be replicated to provide mentoring, and extended to peer mentoring with practice teams. For these purposes, internal mentors should be appointed or the service of external mentors contracted.)

Working against practitioner research is a lack of support in typically small organisations with a high staff turnover. The difficulties of working in small establishments and with frequent changes of personnel need to be addressed at organisational and professional levels. In some respects GRIP met a larger need to provide social workers with a rationale and opportunities for meeting – both within and across agencies – and to offer professional development and ongoing education.

Building a practitioner research culture in many organisational settings, although not all, means starting from a fairly low base, and requires sustained work to develop skills and motivations and manage aspirations and processes. The expectation should not be that the practitioner develops research in practice; impetus and support must come from the organisation in terms of building a practitioner research culture and valuing the activity and its outcomes. As Farmer and Weston (2002) suggest, this will involve bottom-up, top-down and whole-system developments. The responsibility for developing practitioner research extends beyond individual organisations to their interaction and co-operation within sectors, networks and fields of practice. If a GRIP-type approach is to be supported in the real world, universities need to work with such groups of organisations to build partnerships and to get

managers to value practitioner research (LeCompte, Schensul, Weeks, and Singer, 1999). This is likely to be much easier in the kind of organisations already known as 'learning organisations' and those committed to organisational excellence (Corby, 2006).

6.5 Professional context

Our review of the literature (Section 1) began with an overview of social work's aims and rationale, and this section concludes on a similar note of social work professionalism. As a profession, social work must strive to meet certain criteria including a commitment to its core values and to working for the public good; self-regulation; lifelong learning; and commitment to a body of knowledge drawn from theoretical and practical experience.

6.5.1 Contributing to social justice

Social work as a profession is committed to social justice (Hare, 2005). To what extent can practitioner research be seen to contribute towards this goal? The development of practitioner research may produce a number of positive outcomes for social work clients, as individuals, families and communities. The requirement is clearly that social workers not only enjoy and learn about research but that their contact with projects changes the ways they think and thus their practice. The GRIP process, despite its small scale and scope, has already produced encouraging examples of such changes (see Table 4).

6.5.2 Social work standards and identity

Social work in New Zealand, as internationally, is continually working to raise practice standards and foster professional identity. At the professional level there needs to be more emphasis on professional development and practitioner research in recruitment, appointments and job descriptions. This may involve better recognition of the obligation of the code of ethics of the New Zealand Association of Social Workers (1993) or Social Work Registration Board's code of conduct (2005). The social work profession also must attend to its self-image and develop practice robust research links at micro, meso and macro levels. Social work must also remain alert to attempts to reduce its activities and processes to isolated tasks.

6.5.3 Lifelong learning

Adequate educational preparation and ongoing training are core professional concerns. A research culture in many organisations and sectors will have to be built from a low base, and will require concerted professional attention if it is to harness the energy and enthusiasm of practitioners. The challenge is to also ensure that practitioners understand the basics of research methods and practice, and can use those skills in practice and on practice (Kerner, 2006). This may require the negotiation of a new set of relations between the profession and the tertiary education sector. To provide the kind of expert input and continuing support the workshops offered, universities will need to partner with practice to offer continuing educational opportunities, and perhaps even a post graduate certificate in practitioner research.

Here we must again recognise (see also 2.3) that there is a tension because academics working in applied professions are expected to deliver academic outputs that do not necessarily support practice initiatives such as publishing in practice journals, or mentoring practice projects. Such outcomes are not fully recognised in organisational reviews such as the Performance Based Research Fund and thus become downgraded as research activity. Social work researchers may have to spend a lot of time out of the office to ensure the cross-fertilisation and development of research ideas, but this will not always result in refereed journal articles and contributions to academic publications, which are the currency of academic life. At the very least there needs to be awareness and recognition of the continuum of research that is produced in applied and professional departments.

6.5.4 Utilising a body of knowledge

Knowledge transfer and knowledge creation are core epistemic concerns of social work (see also Thompson et al 2006). Practitioner research as conceptualised here still lags behind practice research in other countries (Landry, Amara, and Lamari, 2001; Lavis, 2006; Lavis, Rodriguez, Woodside and Denis, 2003) in that the findings are not disseminated widely enough, and individual pieces of research are not situated within a broader knowledge base. Creating information raises questions of how it is to be used and its impact on decision-making. The GRIP projects exhibit a

wide range in the quality of the research. Some of the empirical activity is closer to reflective practice than research as generally defined and represents a bare minimum of standard. The challenge is to develop diverse forms of research activity (Pawson, 2003). In some cases the forms of practitioner research undertaken in GRIP failed to centre clients (See, for example, McCrae et al, 2005; Shaw, 2005) and the programme should be seen as a starting point for subsequent developments.

6.6 Vision for the future

Growing Research in Practice was an innovative partnership programme for developing a culture of practitioner enquiry in social service agencies in Auckland. GRIP worked with social service agencies to have them explore research questions that were of immediate concern to practitioners. Workshops, peer support, mentoring sessions and a practice research symposium set a framework and timeline for practice projects. A knowledge map of the process worked to understand what helps practitioners to take up research in practice settings, and to develop collaborative practice-focused inquiry. Guidelines on supporting practitioners' research emerged from the data, the GRIP experience as a whole and the literature. The main conclusions can be summarised as follows.

Practice teams:

1. 'Big-bang' impacts are unlikely to be seen from practitioner projects – although not impossible.
2. Working in a close team environment offers advantages for research, including motivation and the pooling of skills to cover areas such as organisation, research and presentation. It is difficult for research teams to work across organisations and across sites. Teams whose members worked shifts, part-time hours, as volunteers or away from a central site faced additional barriers although they are not insuperable.
3. One person should be charged with keeping each project on track, and custodianship is important for maintaining motivation and completing projects, though not a guarantee of success.

4. Group ownership, clear communication, openness in the team, mutual trust and a commitment to inclusiveness are crucial to the successful completion of team practice research projects.
5. Groups passionate about the practice focus of their projects or about research will maintain enthusiasm and achieve individual and organisational benefits in the process.

Organisational and professional context:

1. Needs regarding time management, forward planning and maintaining motivation can be managed by providing an appropriate framework. A close-ended commitment and project milestones are useful for this purpose.
2. The role of the employing organisation is important for practitioner research projects and practitioner research generally. Organisations need to help build teams and encourage the networking of resources.
3. Organisations need to institute procedures and requirements regarding research-related activities.
4. Systems need to be developed or negotiated to provide mentoring and learning opportunities through contracting or partnerships.
5. The responsibility for developing practitioner research lies with various bodies, sectors, networks and fields of practice. To encourage practitioner research, professional bodies, training institutions, social service agencies and individuals in influential positions need to persuade decision-makers to value practice research and recognise its benefits.

We recommend that the responsibility for research be shared between the practitioner, the organisation and other key stakeholders – including academics. Following further consultation and reflection on this topic and an assessment of the longer-term and more substantial outcomes and impacts of participating in GRIP and conducting small-team research, we envisage the development of an integrated practice-based research model incorporating different role-players with varying responsibilities to grow research in practice.

Appendix 1: A collection of resources

[http://www.education.auckland.ac.nz/uoa/education/about/programmes/social/grip\](http://www.education.auckland.ac.nz/uoa/education/about/programmes/social/grip)

or

<http://sscs.massey.ac.nz/links.htm>

Appendix 2: A collection of papers

<http://www.education.auckland.ac.nz/uoa/education/about/programmes/social/grip>

or

<http://sscs.massey.ac.nz/links.htm>

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➤ Giving New Zealand families a voice *Te reo o te whānau*

Wellington office

Public Trust Building, Level 6
117–125 Lambton Quay
PO Box 2839, Wellington 6140
Phone 04 917 7040
Fax 04 917 7059

Auckland office

Level 5, AMI House
63 Albert Street, Auckland 1010
Phone 09 970 1700

Email

enquiries@nzfamilies.org.nz

Commission website

www.nzfamilies.org.nz

The Couch website

www.thecouch.org.nz