Producing and consuming knowledge in social work practice: research and development activities in a Swedish context
Karin Alexanderson, Elisabeth Beijer, Staffan Bengtsson, Ulf Hyvönen, Per-Ake Karlsson and Marie Nyman

This article presents various forms of activities performed by locally based social welfare research and development (R&D) units in Sweden. The authors argue that these units are vital actors in the field of encouraging and strengthening evidence-based social work practice. They are close to social services organisations and have the ability to use flexible methods in order to bridge the gap between research and practice in a local context. The theoretical framework for the article is the organisational excellence model – an archetype for how research can be used in practice.

Introduction

The concept of evidence and utilisation of evidence, in relation to other sources of knowledge, still remains unclear in practice. Bearing the origins of evidence-based medicine in mind, three main sources of knowledge have been identified as important in evidence-based practice: research evidence; the views and expectations of service users; and the experience-based knowledge of practitioners (Sackett et al, 1997; Trinder and Reynolds, 2001). Additionally, the local context provides an important arena for analysing the interaction between practice and research. Even if evidence is crucial, it remains provisional, socially constructed and subject to interpretation. Furthermore, the experience-based knowledge of the practitioner is something that has to be visualised, analysed and spread within the field of social work. In short, if we want to develop practice we also have to find methods to disseminate and debate the experience of everyday practice (Rycroft-Malone et al, 2004). This kind of perspective also relates to, and can help develop and strengthen, knowledge translation theories concerning implementation work.

The aim of this article is to describe how experience-based knowledge can be made visible by giving some examples of how this has been done in Swedish social welfare services, in collaborations between social services agencies and research and development (R&D) units. These examples will be linked to theories and discussed in relation to different research utilisation models. By using one of these models, it is argued that R&D activities can broaden the concept of evidence-based practice and help bridge the gap between research and practice.

Key words: evidence-based practice • practitioner knowledge • research and development

Evidence & Policy • vol 5 • no 2 • 2009 • 127-39 • 10.1332/174426409X437883
Research utilisation models

When talking about improving the knowledge base in social work, we automatically touch on a number of ontological and epistemological questions. What is it possible to know? What counts as knowledge? Knowledge produced by whom? Who is the recipient? According to Nutley et al (2007) there are three models or archetypes of how research can be used in practice: the research-based practitioner model; the embedded research model; and the organisational excellence model (Table 1).

The research-based practitioner model assumes that it is the role and responsibility of the individual practitioner to keep informed about the latest research findings, which are then used to inform day-to-day practice. Research use is understood as a linear process in which the researcher produces knowledge and the practitioner consumes knowledge. Education, training and access to knowledge resources (often electronic) are seen as key factors enabling research use. Practitioners are assumed to have professional autonomy, which makes it possible for them to make independent decisions according to the client's need.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Three models for research utilisation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Model</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The research-based practitioner model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The embedded research model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The organisational excellence model</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: After Nutley et al (2007)
The embedded research model focuses on the policy level rather than the individual practitioner. It addresses managers at local levels but also activities at national level. Research findings become embedded in systems, processes and standards, and research use is seen as a linear and instrumental process.

The organisational excellence model focuses on collaboration between leaders, managers and social workers, as parts of a learning organisation, with participating researchers from universities and other organisations. The nature of research findings is understood to be wider than just the effects of interventions. Organisations within the welfare system are not just recipients and users of research findings, they are also the focus for local experimentation, evaluation and practice development based on research. Furthermore, they may play more of an active part in producing knowledge, for example by hosting clinical researchers, formulating new research questions and/or describing and making use of experience-based knowledge. This model stresses that research utilisation is facilitated through a partnership between different kinds of research organisations and agencies within the social welfare sector. Local and regional R&D units are one type of facilitator.

Research and development units

During the 1990s, Sweden witnessed an increasing number of local R&D units in the health and social welfare sectors, and by 2000, more than 80 such units were in place. Some have their main focus on social services for children and families, others on caring for older or disabled people, while some are engaged in all these areas. Some are active in both the social welfare and health sectors. They are mostly small units with limited resources, working close to practice and more or less closely linked to universities. The average budget in both types of unit in 2005-06 was about £235,000 (2.8-2.9 million Swedish crowns) and the average staff was 2.7 full-time workers with a variance between one and seven (Socialstyrelsen, 2007, 2008). Actual staff numbers may often be higher because part-time working and shared employment, for example between a university and an R&D unit, are very common.

In 2001, a national R&D association was founded, covering more than 80% of the 290 municipalities in Sweden. This relatively new phenomenon of a rapidly growing number of R&D units, besides the universities, has been labelled 'The hidden university' (Bergström et al, 2000). It is also important, when considering the context in which the units operate, to bear in mind that social services in Sweden are the responsibility of the local municipality and that both have a high degree of self-determination; there is a national legislative framework but the system for service delivery is rather decentralised. As a consequence, the R&D units need to work in a flexible way in different settings.

According to Ekermo (2002), the local R&D concept in Swedish social welfare can be captured in three key phrases:

- knowledge development close to practice;
- interplay between research and practice;
- participation of practitioners.
The nearness to practice often refers to the location of the R&D units but it can also refer to the research approach: that is, a development-oriented and interactive approach in which field-based research is applied locally in the very same context in which it is carried out. The interplay between research and practice emphasises mutuality and a dialogue between the researcher and the practitioner. And, finally, the participation of practitioners reflects the ambition of engaging them in activities such as seminars, R&D circles, evaluations and research projects. These can all be seen as 'learning events'.

The rise of the R&D units reflects criticism of Swedish universities for not having enough interest in dealing with practical, work-related questions and problems. It also reflects the upswing of a problem-based and multidisciplinary research ideal, built on collaboration between researchers and practitioners (Ekermo, 2002). Svensson et al (2002) describe four different kinds of relations between the researcher and participants/practitioners, using the following 'ideal-types':

- research on;
- research for;
- research by (commissioned);
- research with.

The first type, research on, refers to traditional academic research. The researcher is the distant expert, deciding what questions are to be investigated, collecting data as objectively as possible on one or two occasions and presenting the final results by writing a report. Doing research for, means that the researcher still has the initiative but acts in favour of some specific group of people 'in need'. The third type, research by, is when a commissioner sets the terms for the work and the researcher helps out. The last type, research with, is when the researcher and the participants/practitioners interact during the research process, producing knowledge in a collaborative way. It is sometimes called participatory research (Nielsen and Svensson, 2006).

How the R&D units in Sweden work and how they contribute to practice was investigated in two recent studies, published by Socialstyrelsen, the National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen, 2007, 2008). The first study focused on units providing services for older people in need of care while the other concentrated on units oriented towards social services for children and families. In these studies, more than 20 different activities carried out by R&D units were identified, in the following categories:

- examining and investigating activities;
- activities for transmitting and developing knowledge and providing inspiration;
- activities to support innovations close to practice;
- consultation, giving advice;
- unspecified activities.

A major part of the activities were to be found in the second category.
The different ‘developmental roles’ that R&D units can have in relation to practice is illustrated in the model in Figure 1. The different positions in the model are defined by the degree of nearness to practice and by the degree of involvement in their developmental work (as agents/actors or as observers).

**Figure 1: Different roles in R&D work**

The **adviser** is a distant supporter of practice, but still takes part in the design of the developmental work through their advice. The **reviewer** investigates practice from a distance as an observer or spectator. The **innovation supporter** is involved in developing new methods in direct contact with practitioners. The **pedagogue** works close to practice, providing knowledge without being engaged in the practical (developmental) work.

In the next section, some examples of R&D activities are presented. These illustrate the different roles of the R&D units as described above and they have one aim in common: to make the experience-based knowledge of the practitioner more visible. The examples are chosen to illustrate the variety in how the units work. Thus, the sample is purposive rather than statistical.

**Examples of R&D activities**

*Implementing methods for systematic documentation*

There are several reasons for introducing methods for systematic documentation in social work practice. Systematic documentation, sometimes specified in the form of assessment tools, is meant to help the social worker assess the needs of the client and decide the kind of help that would be best. It is also meant to be a tool for follow-up. Besides being helpful in social work with individuals, systematic documentation can be a basis for performance planning at the group level as well as generating questions for research purposes. While it is a key tool of accountability, systematic
documentation also has an important role in evidence-based practice to enable better decisions about interventions, to follow up the client systematically and to track their progress over time. It is also a way of viewing the social worker’s experience-based knowledge about what works, based on dialogues with clients.

Four social service agencies with five different teams in the central part of Sweden wanted to implement methods for systematic documentation in day-to-day practice: two teams working with children and families; and three teams working with drug abusers. An R&D unit supplied a researcher as a project leader. The purpose of the project was to implement two partly different methods for systematic documentation that were built in and adjusted to social work practice: ASI (Addiction Severity Index) used with clients having problems with alcohol and drugs (McLellan et al, 1992; Andréasson et al, 2003); and IUS (a local model for integrated evaluation in social welfare) here used in children and family care (Sandell, 2003).

The study revealed that the implementation of ASI and IUS did not occur to the extent that was intended: the methods were not used in all new cases that occurred during the project (Alexandersson, 2006). After the project ended, three of the five teams decided to continue to use ASI (one team) and IUS (two teams). The overall impression is that the respondents often expressed willingness to use ASI and IUS but did not have the capacity (Vedung, 1997). Social workers, managers and politicians did experience the methods as useful and relevant for social work practice, although the analysis shows that the organisations did not, in action, seem to be very interested in the results for their clients (Alexandersson, 2006). They were more focused on helping and taking care of people than considering the effects on their lives. The knowledge base for social work practice also seemed to be traditionally weak. Conditions that hampered the implementation of the new methods were high staff turnover, lack of education in the methods during the project, lack of preparation for additional tasks such as follow-up interviews, and lack of data support. There was too much space for action by the individual social worker, which can also be understood as lack of support from managers, lack of time, vague goals and bureaucratic obstacles. The results show that implementing new methods is not a question of information or decided policy. It is more complex than that.

The study by Alexandersson (2006) also analysed the conditions that either promote or hamper the implementation of methods for systematic documentation, follow-up and evaluation in social work services. The researcher had an interactive role, which means, in terms of the different roles in Figure 1, giving innovation support and advice and sometimes having a reviewing role. The aim of this close, proactive approach was to gain knowledge during the process of implementing the new systematic documentation methods. The practitioners did not take any active part in the research study concerning the research design. They were not involved in formulating questions or analysing data but they did take part during the project by discussing and reflecting on many questions related to the research study. According to the organisational excellence model (Table 1), it seems appropriate for an organisation to use methods for systematic documentation, both for learning from its own local experience and for describing, analysing and disseminating its experiences for wider consideration and re-examination by colleagues or researchers.
Mutual examination within assessment work

Fundamental to the concept of quality work is the ability to meet different kinds of expectations (Gough, 2005). Officials deciding whether a citizen should be granted public support are supposed to be guided by the prevailing legislation but assessment work is always a matter of interpretation. An important question, therefore, is how can the assessment work of the social services agency be developed in order to strengthen legal rights and justice? On top of this, changes in policies and laws will constantly generate new questions. In order to make assessment work as effectively as possible, projects have been launched in a Swedish county, with the aim of creating meeting places or study circles where officials working with assessments in relation to the 1994 Swedish Disability Act can come together to discuss problems and learn from each other (Bengtsson, 2007).

One such circle involved officials representing different municipalities. Initially, the participants were asked to choose between two approaches to examining assessment issues. They could choose either to interview another colleague or to examine records or files consisting of actual assessment data. After an initial seminar, the participants decided to use the interview model, which included the construction of an interview guide. The next assignment was to visit colleagues from another municipality and conduct interviews, which were later transcribed and sent to the regional R&D unit to be compiled, analysed and integrated with relevant research. Group interviews were conducted with the officials, which gave the participants the opportunity to further discuss data collected from the study circle.

This project illuminated a number of different assessment issues that have to be addressed by social service organisations, including internal collaboration. For instance, there was a tendency for complicated cases to fall between two stools, where no one really took responsibility for the client. Most of the municipalities also lacked collaboration models that were able to promote optimum problem solving. The lack of a child perspective within assessment work was identified as another problem, and the project also illuminated the problems that officials faced in interpreting diagnosis and what this meant for the clients’ own living conditions (Bengtsson, 2007).

This experience of study circles shows that they can provide an arena where quality work can move forward and, at the same time, generate new research questions. Encouraging professionals to conduct their own research, under supervision and with support from R&D units, is one way of promoting a stronger learning organisation according to the organisational excellence model. In this example, the role of the R&D worker is to act as a pedagogue and an adviser. Simultaneously, the role of the R&D unit is to review problems identified by practitioners and to pass them on to the field of research.

Evaluation workshops

Some R&D units in Sweden arrange so-called evaluation workshops in which welfare professionals meet in order to conduct evaluations together with researchers/professional evaluators. These evaluations can be termed internal because they relate
to something the participants themselves are working with, and because the intent to promote knowledge is dominant (Karlsson, 2002).

The workshops bring together a group of participants from different workplaces with workshop leaders. The participants bring evaluation assignments from their own organisations and during the workshop the competence required for evaluation is created through learning activities. Support is provided in the form of themed mini-lectures, and through a process of dialogue and reflection around issues that arise while the evaluations are in progress. The agenda is more or less the same each time, with mini-lectures, a run-through of the different projects, and the formulation of ‘homework’ assignments that the participants are to complete prior to the next meeting. The ambition is that the structure of the meetings should be both clear and flexible. Participants are expected to participate actively, exchanging views and experiences in order to help each other forward. Group processes and dynamics are fundamental. Most of the work with the evaluations is conducted in the participants’ home organisations, between the workshop meetings (Beijer et al., 2006).

The final reports (verbal and written) from the participants are intended to provide feedback to the home organisations, and to be used for development work within them. The evaluation workshops have learning effects in two dimensions: the individual and the organisational. Having the employees themselves analyse and change the work of their organisations has a major impact on competence development both for the individual and for the work of the organisation as a whole (Karlsson et al., 2008).

In evaluation workshops the R&D unit acts mainly as the adviser and the pedagogue. The leader also has the role of reviewer, complementing the participants’ internal perspectives with an external evaluation perspective. Our experiences are that these workshops have the potential of providing a more dialectical exchange between theory and practice, and could therefore be a more suitable method for the organisational excellence model rather than for the other two summarised in Table 1.

**Gender perspective studied in an R&D circle**

An R&D circle including eight social workers from four different municipalities was launched on the topic of gender perspectives on social work with children. A national foundation initiated the project and invited four additional R&D units to participate (Clæzøn, 2008). The purpose of the circle was to develop a more accurate gender perspective on children’s needs and to reflect on the importance of gender perspectives in social work.

An R&D circle is a support to encourage the accessibility of research and its application in day-to-day practice. The opportunity to define and formulate themselves around their work makes it possible for participants to clearly see available resources and needs, while the process of reflecting and viewing their work duties in a broader perspective increases knowledge for the group as well as for the individual (Magnusson et al., 2007). The circle leader’s function is to inspire participants to engage in deeper studies, document the work and, in this particular circle, participate in meetings with circle leaders from other R&D units, led by a scientific tutor.
The participants in the circle studied a report in which social services' activities were evaluated for the first time from an equality perspective (Socialstyrelsen, 2004). Swedish social services for children reflect traditional attitudes about gender and family, particularly vis-à-vis parents, and there is a perceived need to examine the implications of these attitudes for social work with girls/boys and women/men in need. Each circle chose its own theme, which included 'the development of parenthood on the basis of a gender perspective'. This circle focused on children in care and their need for contact with their biological parents, finding that several children had no contact with their biological fathers. The social workers became aware that they made a distinction between fathers and mothers in relation to how much effort they put into maintaining relationships with children. The documentation of the circles will be a starting point for further discussions among the agencies in the region and on a national level. Colleagues will inspire colleagues to be more aware of the gender perspective in their day-to-day practice. In relation to Figure 1, the role of the R&D worker in this example seems to be that of a pedagogue and a supporter close to practice. However, the example also shows a way of describing, analysing and disseminating the experience-based knowledge of practitioners.

Discussion

The aim of this article has been to describe how experience-based knowledge can be made more visible through collaboration between social services organisations and R&D units in Sweden. It has also attempted to relate these methods to evidence-based social work and research utilisation models. The examples presented show that the roles of R&D workers can differ. According to the concepts in Figure 1, the main roles are those of adviser and pedagogue. However, R&D workers sometimes have a reviewer role as well, as in the second example, while the first example also describes the role of giving innovation support. This mix of roles indicates that R&D units and their staff need to be close to social work practice, but also able to dissociate themselves when needed. R&D workers need to be able to have a foot in both camps. They require competences from research, social work practice and pedagogy, and the different roles described correspond to a high degree to the organisational excellence model in Table 1.

Our standpoint is that development- and evidence-in-use models must be flexible enough to encourage professionals to be a part of a mutual process that intertwines research with experience-based practice. However, putting R&D units to work requires an organisational structure that is open, dynamic and regards quality improvement as an ongoing process. The kind of activities discussed in this article highlight different ways of working in R&D units that could promote the establishment and development of a so-called organisational excellence model. R&D activities weaken the border between practice and research, and put researchers, practitioners, managers and policy makers into the arena of change and interaction. Therefore, the concept of evidence-based practice must not be isolated from the concept of the learning organisation. It presupposes a greater focus on experience-based knowledge and variation within the local context. One must also keep in mind that social work is not an isolated
phenomenon. It is constantly under the influence of regulation, politics and societal values; social workers and social work organisations can never escape from these circumstances.

Bridging the gap between research and practice is a crucial question for all the R&D units in Sweden and is closely connected to the development of evidence-based practice. The use of different R&D activities provides a fruitful opportunity to illuminate the experience that professionals carry. In this respect, development work is not solely about implementing new research. The participants in an R&D activity are given the opportunity to learn more about research findings, not simply from impact studies but also from all sorts of research and theories. It also offers them a chance to work with day-to-day problem solving, using research findings in combination with their professional experiences and encouraging them to learn more and to reflect on their own practice. Studies of research utilisation show that professionals use research results more often if they relate more clearly to day-to-day problem solving. Evidence also suggests that the relationship between the researcher and the research user is an important factor (Tydén, 1993, 2003; Nutley et al., 2007).

There is always a risk that valuable experience will remain locked inside the individual. The kinds of R&D activities described in this article could help professionals to document their own work and their own experience, and thus make local knowledge more visible to colleagues. Through R&D activities, professionals can be given a chance to learn more about how to design evaluations, formulate (research) questions, collect and analyse data, and present, use and disseminate the results. Evaluations and their documentation can illuminate both pitfalls and rewarding examples from social work practice. The activities of R&D units therefore play an important role when it comes to issues such as quality work, effectiveness and professional learning.

Another issue to be addressed is how the R&D worker handles the balance between, on the one hand, criticising and imposing changes on the organisation and, on the other, acting as a kind of colleague. This raises questions of objectivity and integrity, and it is necessary to discuss and decide what role the R&D unit should play in bridging the gap. Is the R&D worker a near agent or a more distant observer (see Figure 1)? Are they conducting 'research with', 'research on' or 'research for'? The kind of development work discussed in this article means that the R&D units are generally moving closer to organisations and conducting research with them. R&D activities are seldom research at a distance (although they could be).

Apart from these challenges, we maintain that the concept of knowledge must be understood in a broader sense in which the professionals, and their work, are made more visible. In short, research and practice represent syntheses of knowledge.

Conclusions

To conclude, the examples given in this article illustrate how R&D units, according to the organisational excellence model, can contribute to developing evidence-based social welfare practice in Sweden. The unit can function as a facilitator, bridging the gap between research and practice and creating an arena that goes beyond research on
to realise the benefits of research with, in which practitioners and researchers more clearly interact during the research process. Another reflection that emerges from this perspective is that the concept of evidence-based practice must move beyond issues of external validity and the implementation of national instruments and innovations developed solely by researchers. In contrast, we emphasise that evidence-based practice and R&D work must be understood as a broader framework in which different R&D roles are in play in a variety of local settings. The examples given above highlight the fact that the R&D role must be more flexible one. Without the participation of practice, profound development work is impossible, and this article underlines the importance of letting the practice-based question decide what kind of R&D role is the most appropriate – the innovation supporter, the adviser, the reviewer or the pedagogue. This kind of question-driven organisation, which embraces collaboration between practice and research, is the key factor constituting the learning organisation.

In trying to build that kind of learning organisation, more studies at the organisational level have to be conducted, and different R&D activities must be further evaluated in the local settings in which they appear. The first steps on an ongoing journey have been taken.

**Note**

1 We believe that the terms 'evidence-based practice', 'evidence-informed practice' and 'knowledge-based practice' are very close in meaning.

**References**


