

Practitioners Research on Mental Health Rehabilitation in Collaborative Research Networks

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This paper presents the results and experiences from a number collaborative practitioner research networks (CPN's) in a Danish context.

The role of practitioner research is still controversial[1]. We want to discuss the following questions: What kind of research strategy fits to practice? How can the research work be organised in daily work? How can the results be utilised? How can the practitioner make research a part of a career? Does practitioner research in mental health social work make a research field?

What is research

Research can be divided into basic research sector research practitioner research and service user research. Basic research and practitioner researches do not answer the same questions even if they study the same themes. If the practitioners want evidence-based answers to their questions, they have to do the research themselves.

Practitioners research - what is that?

In our context practitioner research means research carried out by practitioners who spend 80% of their working hours on practice work[2].

1. Done by practitioners in work
2. Focus on problems in the daily life of the practitioner Using scientific strategies & methods
3. Are 'do-able'
4. Are communicated to practitioners

The collaborative network

A network involves 6-9 teams' practitioners from different rehabilitation units spread out over the country. Each team includes 2-3 practitioners. The network shares a theme and a couple of research questions. A collaborative research network works for one and a half-year. The results are communicated in reports, paper and seminars. During the last 8 years we have tried to produce knowledge to practitioners by training them to make their own research. 8 networks have gathered 41 (35 completed) practitioner research projects and approx. 75 practitioners.

Problems within practitioners research

Practitioners encounter many barriers, if they want to do research - even if they have a relevant education. There is hardly any tradition and understanding for practitioners who carry out research while on work. The most difficult task is to find time and resources for research as the daily demands from management, colleagues and clients constantly result in a low priority for research activities.

Comparing PRN to traditional research strategies

| | Practitioner based knowledge | Evidence based knowledge |
|-------------------------|--|--|
| Theoretical perspective | Situated | Global |
| Nr. of units | Small | Big |
| Methodology | Case study strategy Action Research | Quasi Experimental strategy |
| Data | Multiple sources of data for triangulation | Validated outcome measures for computation |
| Generalisations | Analytic | Statistic |
| Dissemination | Local Reports, Personal communication | Journals and books |
| Implementation strategy | Bottom-up | Top-down |

3 components of collaborative research networks

The CRN- strategy guides the participating practitioners through the phases of the research project towards published results. Three

components tie the projects together in a network to create synergy: The thematic collaboration, the methodological collaboration and the network organisation. I will mention a few important aspects of the thematic collaboration and the research strategy and focus more on the network organisation.

The thematic collaboration

The themes cover the complex problems in the daily life of the practitioners. The questions relevant by practitioners is very often why and how questions. It turns out to be explorative studies.

The themes of the networks are shown at the overhead. The themes are carefully selected and refined by interviews by practitioners. It is not studies of the same variables in the same context as you find in controlled multi-site studies. The themes such as everyday life, The themes attract participants from different contexts. In the project you will meet people from all over the country who are professionally occupied with the same problems in different contexts. This adds much energy to dialogues and the synergy. Projects of one year's duration are not naturally comprehensive, but when 6-7 projects address the same problem from different viewpoints, a synergetic effect makes the individual study more meaningful and adds a depth to the whole study. When you study action plans we got studies of the contracting process, the diagnostic phase, the prioritising, the goal setting, the decision processes and the feed back processes - it is quite a wealth of documented experiences.

The methodological collaboration: the case study strategy

As the daily life phenomena are complex, the single elements cannot be separated and studied individually. The study of these complex phenomena demands the use of methods suitable for analysing the complexity. The case study strategy - the study of individual cases - is a suitable method for this type of phenomena. Thus the use of and training in case studies is a part of the project, and a manual for planning of case studies has been worked out. The training is based on the case research strategy outlined by Robert K. Yin [3]. The methodological similarity between the projects is an advantage in order to learn from each other. Besides the strategy is very similar to the practitioners' way of thinking. The network is considered as an multiple case study and a cross case analysis is part of the final report.

The collaborative network organisation

Practitioner's research is constantly threatened by the daily acute problems. Therefore a great number of outside "forces" must support the research work and must be able to compete with the demands of everyday life. The network construction and culture contributes considerably to the success of the projects[4].

Participation in a CPN is based on a written contract with the employer - not the participants. We have obtained funding worth 2 months salary of the researchers for each project under the condition that employer provides appropriate and defined working conditions for the participants. The participants are in the contract obliged to draw up a report on their research and an article for publication.

It appears from the contract upon signing on what dates all the meetings take place the following year - the network organisation has a longer time perspective than the working place.

One of the most motivating factors is the seminar, where the participants meet for 24 hours every second month. Some of the seminars are open for invited guests, who can discuss the projects. A running e-mail conference contributes to strengthen the "project consciousness" in everyday life.

A number of days have been allotted a year ahead to consultant assistance for the projects.

The network provides assistance in areas, where the participants are not expected to have the resources: tape recorders, secretarial assistance, statistic advice, literature search and critical reading.

Results

No complicated documentation is needed to note the presence of 8 networks and 34 accomplished projects, an extensive written presentation and a number of current projects. The three components form a practicable strategy with a high degree of finished work. The distance between research and practice is minimal in practitioner research and thus the results of the projects are often implemented during the project. We have seen new knowledge used locally and for educational purposes. New and bigger projects grow out of the first one. We have seen the preliminary profiles of a PR-career. Ten people out 75 have already participated in more than one CPN.

Discussion

Is CPN good practitioner research? The case study strategy produces detailed analysis but does not lend itself to high levels of generalisations. We must use measures of how practice is informed and transformed by the use of practitioner research[5]. It is an important issue how employers are able to utilise the competence of practitioner researchers.

Do practitioner researchers emerge from collaborative research network? A practitioner researcher is a person who makes research a part of his/hers practitioner career. I think we still need to prove that such a career is wanted and possible [6].

To claim practitioner research in mental health social work a research field and not just an example of collaborative action research we still need an organisation of practitioner researchers[7].

Conclusion

The results show that the collaborative research network is a method of working that gives the practitioners in social work an opportunity to plan, carry out and report case studies.

Many of the results have been implemented in practice. The use of a research strategy itself appears to strengthen the problem solution in daily work. An important quality indicator is how the research informs and transforms practice.

It is still too early to predict, if practitioner research advances the making of proper "practitioner researchers" and creates a community of practitioners researcher in mental health rehabilitation.

Literature

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