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Lessons Learned from Practitioner-Research

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This paper is based on evaluations of two practitioner-research programmes (PRPs). It outlines these programmes, gives a rationale for the production of practitioner-research and highlights some of the key lessons that were learned.

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Description of Previous Practitioner-Research Programmes

This paper is based on evaluations of two practitioner-research programmes (PRPs). The first was carried out in 2007-08 by the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (CRFR) and the Centre for the Older Person's Agenda (COPA) at Queen Margaret University. The second was carried out by CRFR and the Social Work Department at the University of Edinburgh in 2009-2010.

Both PRPs are defined by the focus on (1) research training for practitioners (2) support with dissemination of project outputs and (3) knowledge exchange and engagement.

Practitioner-Research, particularly in the area of social work, makes up "a major part of the total volume of research activity in this field" (Mitchell et al, 2010, p. 8). Despite the volume, this research is often hindered due to a lack of engagement with existing research evidence, a less-rigorous application of theory and method and a lack of resources for dissemination within and between organisations. The support for the PRP, through training, dissemination and knowledge exchange, is designed to address these limits.

Practitioner-research is valuable because it supplies practitioners with increased evidence to support improvement in their practice. PRPs also allow for the production and use of research evidence to be embedded within a service organisation. For researchers within the academy, practitioner-research offers an opportunity to support research with has a direct and observable impact on practice. Furthermore, the collaboration between practitioners and researchers in the university has the potential to produce on-going research relationships and knowledge sharing (Cunningham, 2008; Fouche and Lunt 2010; Lunt et al., 2010; Mitchell et al., 2010; Shaw and Lunt, 2011)

PRPs also come with their own challenges. The paper below is based on feedback from mentors and practitioners involved in two PRPs. It outlines some of these challenges as a basis for further learning and development of this kind of research.

PRP #1: Older People, User Involvement and Families and Relationships

This PRP focused on three key areas of service use: older people, families and relationships and user involvement over a 12-month period in 2007-08. It was funded through a knowledge exchange grant at the University of Edinburgh.

This programme aimed to:

- Develop a programme of practitioner led research on key current issues in older people, user involvement and families and relationships
- Draw out the policy and practice implications of this work and disseminate widely
- Create opportunities for the development and submission of further collaborative research bids between practitioner organisations and CRFR and COPA.

In order to achieve these aims, this PRP supported a group of practitioner-researchers in designing a research project. This included research skills training and guidance with dissemination of research results.

PRP #2: Involuntary Service Users in Social Work

This PRP focused on working with front line social workers to explore their engagement with involuntary users of social work services, in particular those whose circumstances lawfully require

social work intervention. The focus on involuntary service users emerged through discussions with the six Scottish Local Authorities which were partners in this project.

The programme aimed to:

- Understand and explore the context in which social work with involuntary service users takes place, and to explore the issues and obstacles to assess customer needs/demands in statutory social work
- Gather and share evidence of 'what works' in engaging and supporting involuntary service users using a networking approach in order to meet the knowledge needs of Scottish local authorities
- Engage in a process of training and capacity-building for local authority staff through the organisation and delivery of placements in each council
- Support effective dialogue and learning around the key issues, and the obstacles to engagement and support
- Ensure knowledge exchange and increased capacity at an organisation and management level around lessons that can be shared for social work with involuntary service users in local authority settings

The project met these aims through a practitioner-research programme which increased the analytical skills and research capacity of participating staff. This programme also provided a strengthened evidence base for social work practice and management practices. In addition, the project hosted a series of knowledge exchange events and activities which supported the translation of research evidence into practice.

Key Lessons Learned

Organisational Support

As Practitioner-Research is conducted alongside practice, capacity and time-constraints are a significant challenge for the successful completion of research projects. In both PRPs, practitioners felt that the time allotted away from work was insufficient to complete the project. As a result, most felt the need use their own time in order to ensure completion of the research and some were unable to complete their research projects due to more pressing requirements at work.

The key recommendation is ensure that practitioners have sufficient time within the regular paid-work to complete the research projects. At minimum, this entails a half-day per week or two days per month. Some practitioners felt that one day a week was a more suitable time allowance to do this research.

A further recommendation was made about professional accreditation. Practitioners suggested that accreditation for completed projects might off-set the time spent on the projects.

Mentorship

Support from mentors was a highly-valued aspect of the PRPs. Examples of useful practice include the sharing of written summaries in advance of the supervision meetings, support with ethics clearance and formatting of final report, overview of the research process and support with sounding out ideas. Mentors were also noted for their support with networking and recruiting

others to provide advice where necessary. This support took the form of email and face-to-face meetings. Mentors also came to several of the research-training events.

The most significant challenge in this relationship was the infrequency of face-to-face meetings. Feedback from Practitioner-Researchers suggests a need for frequent contact with the desire that some of that contact include face-to-face meetings. This was not always possible due to the distance between mentors and practitioners places of work.

The key recommendation is to ensure that planning of some face-to-face meeting is established as part of the mentorship and that these practical issues are considered in the matching of practitioners and mentors.

Timing

The need for clear milestones and deadlines for completion of tasks was a key issue in both PRPs. In addition, the timescale for completion of research projects was thought to be too short. Feedback from practitioners suggests that it is difficult to make-up time or catch-up on milestones once that have been missed as a sense of frustration and anxiety makes it difficult to complete the tasks involved.

The key recommendations are (1) to ensure that the overall timescale of the project is clear so that practitioners can plan time away from work and ensure that key milestones are completed on time and (2) create clear lines of communication around deadlines and milestones so that timelines can be adjusted if necessary.

Ethics Processes

Ethics clearance was a significant challenge in both PRPs. Ethics approval processes are often time-consuming and complex. Partner organisations have different approaches to ethics approval which also makes it difficult to provide practitioners with standard advice on how to formulate their reflections on the ethical implications for their work. In addition, practitioners may not be familiar with the key contacts in their organisation who can support them with ethical clearance. Mentors in the university may be even less aware of these organisational structures and their ability to support practitioners may be limited.

The implication for practitioners is a potential delay in beginning the data generation phase of their project. Practitioners may also need to re-formulate their research design in order to ensure timely completion of the research projects (i.e. ethics clearance for research with vulnerable individuals may be too time-consuming in which case practitioners may need to adjust the focus of their study).

The key recommendations are to (1) ensure that sufficient time is allotted to the ethical clearance process in the research design and (2) ensure that practitioners have support from their mentor, and project partners/steering group members where necessary, to navigate their own organisation's ethical clearance process.

Cultural Differences

University-based researchers and those located in a practice-setting tend to have different cultures and languages. This can produce challenges in communication as researchers and practitioners will have different types of expertise and varying levels of comfort with one another's specialisms.

Previous practitioner-research programmes have benefitted from asking ‘what practitioners and researchers want to gain from engagement with one another’. In previous programmes, practitioners valued the opportunity to investigate improving their day-to-day practice. University-based researchers benefitted from learning more about research use and impact in practice settings. Tensions can arise when the different needs of project partners are unclear.

The key recommendation is (1) to ensure that discussion is open and informal so that practitioners and researchers can find a common ground of experience and understanding from which to build their working relationship and (2) make clear different needs and assumptions for practice and academic research.

Ownership

Practitioner-Researchers felt that the level of commitment required to produce the research was quite high. Self-motivation and enthusiasm for their project were important criteria for completion, particularly in light of the personal time that practitioners invested in their research.

A sense of personal ownership is an important part of creating motivation and enthusiasm. The core elements of the research training include both substantive methodological and theoretical workshops as well as space for discussion, debate and personal reflection.

The key recommendation is to ensure that practitioners feel secure in their role as the primary researcher in order for them to benefit from the training provided.

Critical Thinking and Debate

Feedback from practitioners indicates that discussion and debate were the highlights of research training and knowledge exchange events. Practitioners felt that the space for discussion helped them to open up debates within their organisations. Others felt that is allowed them to be more reflexive about their own practice.

Critical thinking and reflection are central features of the social sciences. In this respect, social science research is valuable both for its ability to provide instrumental knowledge which seeks to address ‘what works’ in practice and critical reflection which seeks to ask questions about ‘how’ and ‘why’ social problems are understood.

The key recommendation is to ensure that round-table discussions allow for and encourage debate.

Dissemination and Impact

Practitioner-Research benefits from the local and embedded quality of its production. Practitioner-Researchers felt that their research had more validity because it was carried out ‘on their turf’ by someone who was known to be a well-respected practitioner.

Despite the credibility of their research, practitioners felt that they needed the support of their organisation in order for others to engage with the research. When reports were forwarded by senior management, they tended to be read and commented upon. Practitioners felt that this level of support was necessary in order for the research to have a wide readership and engagement within the organisation.

The key recommendation is that the support of managers and research officers in the organisation will encourage engagement with the research and produce higher levels of knowledge exchange within the organisation. Partners and Steering Group members could act as champions of the research in their organisation.

Relationship Building

Relationships between practitioners and researchers are a key determinant in the use of research evidence in practice (Mitchell et al 2009). In particular, personal contact is considered to be a central component of relationship building (Nutley et al 2007).

Feedback from previous practitioner-research programmes indicates that participants in knowledge exchange and research training events valued the interaction and discussion above all. While these events produced lasting relationships between practitioners and researchers, they also produced relationships between researchers and others in their organisation who use and produce research. The value and importance of these relationships is central to ensuring that research has an impact beyond the practitioner's own practice.

Relationship-building is central the production of successful research by practitioners as productive relationships facilitate good communication during research training and mentorship. Relationships between practitioners and others in their organisation facilitate the uptake and application of research evidence. In addition, relationships across organisations encourage the exchange of knowledge, evidence and best practice.

The key recommendation is (1) to ensure that participants in knowledge exchange events reflect a diverse group of practitioners, academics and stakeholders who can take forward research evidence in their organisation (2) to design events that encourage discussion across professional and organisational groups, (3) encourage Project Partners and Steering Group members to champion the research produced.

Keys Recommendations

Practitioner-research programmes increase the use of research evidence in practice-settings. They also increase the capacity for research by providing practitioners with research training. In turn, these programmes tend to produce research which is more relevant to practice because the projects have been generated out of the local knowledge of practitioners.

For researchers, these programmes offer valuable insights into the use of research evidence and the processes of knowledge exchange between the research and practice.

In order for these programmes to be successful, they need to:

1. Create space for dialogue and critical reflection between professional groups and across organisations
2. Create a structure which includes time for the research programme to be planned and delivered. This includes time away from work to complete the research, attendance at training events as well as space in the programme to complete the ethics approval processes.

3. Ensure that practitioners have a sense of ownership over their research and champions within their organisation who will help to take that research forward.
4. Face-to-face contact with mentors and other researchers to ensure there is adequate support for research projects.

Resources

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