

Supporting user involvement in child welfare work – a way of implementing Evidence based practice

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Introduction

In Sweden a quite extensive project started in 2011, with the aim of developing sustainable structures to ensure children's participation in child welfare. It is a project involving social workers, researchers and children in seven regions in Sweden. It can be seen as an effort to bring research into practice and to help social workers to develop working models in order to live up to the requirements of being evidence based. Furthermore, one of the key underlying ideas in the project is to contribute to the implementation into Swedish child welfare of the Convention on the Rights of the Child

In relation to the concept of an evidence based practice (EBP), an important question arises: how can we use experiences and viewpoints from children and young people as a source of knowledge in child welfare practice? In other words, how can we involve children and young people in their own casework as well as on policy level? On the individual level, participation can mean some degree of influence or empowerment for the child or young person whereas a systematic documentation of their voices can be used for follow ups and evaluations, even on an aggregate level. On this level, their experiences and viewpoints can have an impact on policy and practice.

In Alexanderson et. al. (2009; 2012), we developed a macro oriented model to illustrate the need of different kinds of knowledge and different actors to support the implementation and the development of an evidence based practice. In the paper, we will apply the model to a case example to help understand and analyze the performance of an ongoing national project, designed to ensure the involvement of children and young people as a source of knowledge in an evidence based practice.

Involving children and youth as a source of knowledge

The involvement of children and young people in child welfare work is associated with ethical, legal and methodological considerations. There are several circumstances that are important to bear in mind when we want to develop ways to utilize their experiences and viewpoints as a source of knowledge. For instance, it has to be taken into account that the interest of an individual child cannot be seen independently from the interest of the family. We are concerned with vulnerable children, often under severe stress and hard life conditions and sometimes in conflictual relationships with their parents, or other adults on whom they are highly dependent. In Sweden(?), The mission for child welfare/child protection is to provide support, service or protection to the family or to take over tasks that are normally carried out by the family. Thus, when we talk about "users" in child welfare work, this not only includes children and adolescents but also their families (Seim & Slettebø, ed. 2007). For the social worker, it becomes a matter of seeing the child as an actor with the right to voice his or her personal opinion, as well as a subject potentially in need of care and protection. It

means meeting the child with a double approach, combining a participation-perspective with a caring-perspective (see Eriksson & Näsman, 2011).

As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, user involvement can take place on different levels. A distinction can be made between an individual and a collective level (Seim & Slettebø, ed. 2007). We can also differentiate between an individual, a group and a structural level. On the *individual* level, it means having some degree of influence in one's own case. This can be done in more or less structured and systematic ways. In the child welfare area, the well known and common system Looking After Children System (in Sweden called "The child's need in the centre"; BBIC) has had an impact in developing different forms and procedures for involving children in their own case/matter. One example is the Follow-up meetings – sometimes called the child's meeting - with an independent chairperson who is responsible for making sure that the child's voice is heard. On the *group* level, user involvement can include participating in panels, focus groups, surveys on user's satisfaction with the services or in some other way as informants in follow-ups, evaluations or research. On a *structural* level, different user organizations can provide a forum for influencing practice. Related to these different levels, we might find quite different aims with user involvement. On the individual level, it is likely to be participation and empowerment whereas we can expect it to be around service adaption and quality issues at the organizational level. On a structural level, user involvement is most likely to be associated with democratic goals.

The ladder of participation, originating from Arnstein (1969) and later developed by Hart (1992) offers a model for analyzing the degree of participation. This is frequently referred to in research reports and articles on children's participation and co-decision. The different steps in the model represents a certain degree of participation - or non-participation – from manipulation on the lowest step to control (the Arnstein version) and shared decision-making from the child's initiative (in Hart's version) on the highest step. An elaboration of the model was made by Shiers (2001) who reduced the number of steps but added three dimensions to the "pathway to participation: Openings, Opportunities and Obligations.

Using the voices from children and young people as a source of knowledge, which is an explicit purpose of the project, requires a certain degree of participation and influence as well as a way of documenting their viewpoints, experiences and preferences in a systematic way. In addition, the ambition to develop effective and meaningful participation raises the question of whether the organization has the willingness and the capability to make this actually influence the services provided. It also requires interplay between the individual level and the policy level; between the subjective dimension of the meeting and the unique relation between the individual social worker and the child and the aggregated outcomes from follow ups and evaluations.

The practice participation guide presented by SCIE (Wright et. al., 2006) tells us that the organization that wants to implement the meaningful and effective participation of children and young people in the design, delivery and review of their services need to have a "full systems approach". This means systematic work within the whole organization whereby all parts become adjusted to fit this purpose. It means developing i) a *culture* of participation with a commitment to the involvement of children and young people, ii) a *structure* for participation involving staff, resources, decision-making and planning processes, iii) an *effective practice* for participation with methods and routines that enable participation and iv) *effective systems to review* participation.

A national project to ensure children's participation in child welfare

Our empirical case is a project launched by the Children's welfare foundation (CWF)¹ in Sweden, in cooperation with seven research and development (R & D) units in different regions. It is taking place between 2011-2013, in two phases. The CWF is a freestanding national actor, supporting professionals in developing social work with children and young people. CWF has developed a network with R & D units in Sweden engaged in matters concerning social work in this field. In this project, more than 60 social workers from 37 municipalities are involved in seven research circles, with a researcher engaged by the R & D units, as circle leader. Two project leaders, both employees at the CWF, and one scientific leader, are tied to the project. The overall leadership and responsibility for the project lies with the CWF, whereas each R & D unit is responsible for their own research circle. The project is based on experiences from an earlier project, with a similar design and with promising results (Claezon, 2008).

As already mentioned, the overall aim with the present project is to develop working methods and sustainable structures to ensure participation of children and young people in child welfare. The first part of the project (2011-2012) is based on the work in the research circles. During the first year, the participants are expected to formulate ideas of working methods for increased user participation. Some of these ideas will be tested in practice during the second part of the project (2012/2013). Current legislation, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (particularly article 12), and the basic ideas underpinning an evidence based practice, serve as a platform for the project.

In each research circle, which is held for half or a whole day every month, the participants discuss and problematize the significance and meaning of key concepts such as user participation, user involvement and user influence. They reflect on the approaches and strategies used in practice, if these are consistent with guidelines and intentions in current legislation and in line with an evidence based practice. The participating social workers are given the opportunity to describe their daily work and to share their experiences with colleagues. They are also encouraged to reflect on their own experiences by using theoretical perspectives and research, with the support and guidance from the research trained circle leader. A mandatory element in the research circles is to conduct a small study, where children or young people are included as informants.

The mission for the scientific tutor is to strengthen the links between practice and research in the project. Writing a theoretical frame of reference for the topic in the research circles is one of the tasks. Supervising the seven circle-leaders and the two project-leaders is another. The scientific tutor is also responsible for putting together and analyzing documentation from the research circles, made by the circle leaders, as well as producing a book with the results from the whole project. Experiences from the project will be disseminated through national conferences arranged by the CWF and through regional conferences and seminars arranged by the participating R&D units.

In order to coordinate the different regions during the project, a number of activities are being arranged by the CWF: a conference for all participants at the beginning of the project; several meetings with the circle-leaders as well as with contact persons from the R&D units; seminars

¹ <http://www.allmannabarnhuset.se> accessed 2011-12-16.

with managers and politicians; and a concluding conference where the participants from the research circles present what has been accomplished. Through these activities, the learning process in the project is being broadened. Several of these activities also contribute to the local and regional anchoring of the project. A careful anchoring with managers and politicians on different levels is strongly emphasized throughout. This is needed to ensure that the second “practical part” will be carried out. It is also an important prerequisite for achieving the goal of implementing and integrating durable, working methods into practice. Both the R&D units as well as the CWF play significant roles in making this happen.

A macro-oriented model for supporting EBP in social work

A macro-oriented model for supporting EBP in social work is outlined in figure 1. The model is based on a theoretical framework where knowledge is understood in a broad sense. It relies on the origins of EBP rooted in evidence-based medicine (EBM) (Trinder & Reinholds, 2001). David L. Sackett defines EBM in a way that is often quoted: *...the conscientious, explicit, and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions about the care of individual patients.*” (Sackett, 1997 p. 2). Sackett identifies three essential sources for EBM: the views and expectations of service users; the best research evidence available; and the experience-based knowledge of the practitioners (Sackett, 2000). In this case, children and young people are to be understood as service users and as such are one of three knowledge sources that have to be taken into account in social work practice with children and families.

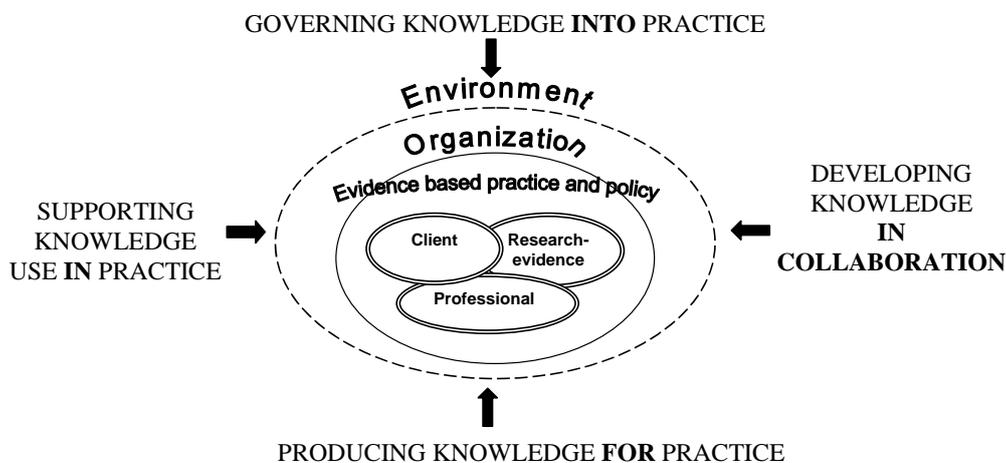


Figure 1. A macro-oriented model illustrating different kinds of knowledge and main activities needed for supporting and performing evidence-based practice in social services.

The model should also be understood as EBP in social work being embedded in an organizational and environmental context where legislation is also a part (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Alexanderson, 2006). These are circumstances that must be considered when developing modes for enhancing the engagement of children and young people in social work practice.

The model also illustrates four main activities, or positions, in promoting EBP: governing knowledge into practice; supporting knowledge use in practice; developing knowledge in collaboration with practice; and producing knowledge for practice. This framework acknowledges the fact that different actors, including practitioners and other professionals, as well as involved clients, have valuable contributions to make in practice. Different actors have different roles in promoting EBP. The project described above gives several examples of various kinds of knowledge utilization as well as different ways of developing and producing knowledge for practice.

Research & development units²

In Sweden, the social services are the responsibility of the local municipalities, which have a high degree of autonomy in relation to the government and other national actors. During the last decades, a large number of R & D units have emerged, owned by one or several municipalities/ counties. Sometimes they are established in partnership with the health care services. Collaboration with a local university is also quite common. Today, almost all municipalities in Sweden have access to such R & D milieus to some extent. They are mostly small-scale with limited resources and work close to practice. They have a local basis with an interactive and development-oriented research approach. Sometimes the role can be described as supporting the *governing of knowledge into practice* through, for example, implementation of different kinds of assessment tools, but also and more often to create possibilities for *development of knowledge in collaboration*. This is mainly done through the learning processes that R & D units can facilitate through dialogue on how to use the results individually and organizationally. R & D units provide arenas for practitioners to express, document and communicate their experiences but also to seek, find, interpret and use evidence, i.e. supporting *knowledge use in practice*. The fourth activity in our model, *producing knowledge for practice*, can also be a matter for the R&D unit, usually in collaboration with universities. Various activities are arranged on a continuous basis; these include research circles or seminars where researchers and practitioners meet on core tasks for developing the practical work in the region.

A case within the national project to ensure children's participation in child welfare

In this part, we will try to reflect on the effectiveness and results, so far, of the R & D circles in relation to the model. The results of one R & D circle will serve as an example to show how different kinds of knowledge and positions have been applied and supported.³

The seven circles are in the end of the first phase by now. They have so far all decided to focus on participation of children and young people in the individual level which means having some degree of influence in one's own case. During the meeting being held we do know that the processes are in some way similar, but also of course different, in each circle. Below, we give the process and the results from one circle relating to the concepts of the model. This circle was led by two leaders from an R & D unit with eight social workers participating from five municipalities.

²<http://www.fouvalfard.org/?id=17> Accessed 2011-12-16.

³The first part of the project will end in May 2012. In time for the conference there will be some more results and examples to be referred.

The participants began to formulate their vision for the work as follows: “Children and young people in social services should experience themselves as participating in matters affecting their own lives”. At that time, they had read some of the articles provided by the scientific tutor (*compare the model: supporting knowledge use in practice*). Five questions were raised:

1. Why should children and young people participate?
2. What is entailed in ensuring children's participation in the investigation / assessment / decision work (the circle made that definition, limits of the area)?
3. What experience do children and young people have of social services and how would they like it to be?
4. What do their colleagues think on these issues?
5. What indications relating to the participation of the child, or the child at all, exists in the reports?

The five questions required different approaches. The first one drew on reading from the theoretical references and also a discussion on the “project place”⁴ and in the circle. The circle leaders summarized the findings; once participants were satisfied with the answers, they moved on to the next question. The finding drew on legislation, research findings, management practice and the child convention (*compare governing knowledge into practice and developing knowledge in collaboration*).

In order to answer the second question, the participants tried to understand and formulate a range of activities with the potential to ensure or increase the participation of children and young people. They still used the scientific framework references, legislation, regulation and provisions from the state, but also their own experiences. These activities were described in a document and applied to their working procedures (*compare governing knowledge into practice and supporting knowledge use in practice*). There were numerous difficulties in this part of the project, in part because the degree of participation of children reflected their age and maturity, as well as level of vulnerability. There are several circumstances that are important to bear in mind when trying to develop ways to utilize the experiences and viewpoints of children and young people as a source of knowledge (Rasmusson 2011).

The next step was to prepare to interview one child and the current social worker of the child, and examine the relevant documentation. The circle delegates worked together to draw up some rules for the interviews, for example they should not interview their own client(s). The leaders of the circle produced a written information sheet for children and parents. They also completed the final version of the survey questions for the children and young people, the current social worker/colleague and a template for the study of the documentation. The questions sprang from the activities described by the professionals (*compare supporting knowledge use in practice or a sort of preparation for developing knowledge in collaboration*).

Eight children, five girls and three boys, between the ages of six and 18 years were interviewed. At the next circle meeting, the participants narrated their interviews. The participants of the circle told the group what the study of the documentation showed, and presented findings from conversations with colleagues. They gave their reflections on the

⁴ Project place is an online service for project collaboration in Europe.< <http://www.projectplace.com/This-is-Projectplace/>> downloaded 2012-02-24.

children's experiences and their suggestions. It became apparent at an early stage that the children did not understand the working process in the same way the profession does.

The two circle leaders then read and analyzed the interviews together between two circle meetings, based on an overarching question: What are the children telling us? The results were finally compiled into a service map with two perspectives: one professional/administrative, and the second from the children and young people's point of view. The proposal for a service map with dual perspectives, prepared by the circle leaders, was further developed in dialogue with the participants of the circle. The administrative perspective was "translated" to make it comprehensible to children and young people and also to match what the children said was important for them. There are two perspectives in the same service map. It ends with an evaluation activity to ensure that the children really do experience participation, for example some sort of method for audit.

The service map is the description of a working method (which may not yet be the final version) aimed at guaranteeing and securing children and young people's participation in child welfare investigations – which could be seen as a part of an evidence-based policy. It is a structure for utilizing the experiences and perceptions of children and young people as a source of knowledge. It was *developed in collaboration between researchers and practitioners* in which several different knowledge sources were used: the professionals' experiences, knowledge from research and knowledge from users. In part II of the project, the model will be tested through implementation efforts. If the method seems to increase the participations of children and young people, the circle has *produced knowledge for practice*.

Discussion

In this section, we discuss to what extent the model can be useful to understand and analyze the performance of the presented case.

Different levels of user participation are considered in the project – individual, group and policy levels. Our model focuses on what is needed at the individual level (a case) to make social work more evidence based. An evidence based policy and a supporting organization is seen as necessary components. The organization and the environment can both be supportive and obstructive. The model does not illustrate the ongoing interplay between these levels, but it demonstrates that the evidence based practice is dependent on organizational conditions.

In the part where the case was presented, several examples were given to illustrate different forms of knowledge, and support for knowledge use, as identified according to the model. The use of handbooks and guidelines from the National Board of Health and Welfare and the BBiC system in child welfare can be understood as forms *for governing knowledge into practice*. One mission for the leaders of the circles and the scientific tutor is to give the participants access to relevant research. This can be seen as using *knowledge produced for practice*. In the circles, this kind of knowledge is put into action in different ways, as illustrated above: it can contribute to creating a base for circle participants studying together with children and young people – with the aim *developing knowledge in collaboration*. At the same time, or maybe integrated (or a spin-of effect), *supporting of knowledge use* is ongoing. The social workers, the CWF and the R & D units are component parts that make this possible.

Knowledge from the case can be used in practice in different ways and on different levels according to the model. In “the middle” (the core), professional social workers will probably be more aware of the way they act, to help encourage children to become more involved while doing their investigative work. Knowledge from the children being interviewed underpins and challenges the professionals’ way of thinking of participation, to make sure that children and young people are given voice and opportunities to influence social services practice. In the referred case, the developed working method was described in a service map. Service users, children and young people were able to influence evidence based policy, whilst also being a part.

On the policy level, it still seems a bit unclear if the service map or the developed working method will work in practice. The implementation process is supposed to be part II of the project. If the service map seems useful and helps ensure the influence of children and young people, then the social workers have produced knowledge for practice in collaboration with service users in a supportive organization. They have used results from research, legislation (the Convention on the Rights of the Child, for example), guidelines from the governance and their own experience; hopefully, they have also benefitted from input from the R & D units. But what if the service map would not meet the expectations? There could be at least three explanations to that. The map could be seen as a program theory. It could be a theory failure, performance failure or something wrong in the ulterior assumptions (Vedung, 1998). In other words: something was wrong in the map; in the implementation process; or the underlying assumptions on which the whole project is based.

In our opinion, the model has demonstrated that it sheds light on the different sorts of knowledge used in the case. In addition, it has illustrated that different actors have different roles to play in evidence based practice in social work with children and young people. It has also shown that children and young people can take an active part in developing policy, as well as comprise one of three knowledge resources in the core of an evidence based practice, in their own case. But the model has its limits. It does not illustrate the ongoing interplay between the individual and the group level in an agency, even it shows that evidence based practice is dependent on organizational conditions.

Like all models, it simplifies the complex reality in which social work takes place. In reality, forms and levels for knowledge use, knowledge production and development of methods for user participation are mixed, rather than separated as in a model. On balance, the application possibilities of the model are debatable: to what extent did it provide us with something new or interesting? Having said that, we have here an interesting example of how to encourage children and young people to take an active part in their own case, as well as influence policy and social work practice.

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