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Pathways for practitioners' participation in creating the Practice-Research encounter

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Title

Pathways for practitioners' participation in creating the Practice-Research encounter.

Abstract

Several major evaluation reports agree that while we know much about interventions that are effective, little use is made of them to help achieve important outcomes for children, families, and adults. Practice Research uses locally based research and/or evaluation in an attempt to fill this gap.. Not understood as a specific research method, Practice-Research is intended as an evolving meeting point between practice and research, and a matter of negotiation between its stakeholders. Central importance is given to practitioners' participation. The article will present and discuss three European experiences that realize Practice-Research in different ways. The aim of the article is to define and analyze differences and commonalities among the three experiences, in order to outline strategies for developing a fruitful encounter between practice and research. Particular emphasis is placed on interaction and discussion, providing opportunities for people to change and gain meaning through interacting, offering opportunities for practitioners to discuss and reflect on the practices and research results.

Title

Pathways for practitioners' participation in creating the Practice-Research encounter.

Titolo in Italiano

Percorsi di partecipazione degli operatori nel creare l'incontro tra Ricerca e Pratica.

Abstract in Italiano

Diversi rapporti di valutazione evidenziano l'avanzamento delle conoscenze per quel che riguarda gli elementi che garantiscono l'efficacia degli interventi, ma scarso uso si sta facendo di essi per supportare il raggiungimento di risultati importanti per i bambini, le famiglie e gli adulti. La Practice-Research si basa su pratiche si ricerca e/o di valutazione svolte a livello locale nel tentativo di colmare questa lacuna. Essa non è intesa come uno specifico metodo di ricerca, ma come punto di incontro in costante evoluzione tra la pratica e la ricerca, e come una questione che riguarda la negoziazione tra i suoi partecipanti . Grande importanza è data alla partecipazione degli operatori. L'articolo presenta e discute tre esperienze europee che in diversi modi hanno realizzato l'incontro tra ricerca e pratica. Lo scopo dell'articolo è di definire e analizzare le differenze e gli elementi in comune tra le tre esperienze, al fine di delineare le strategie per un proficuo incontro tra pratica e ricerca. Particolare enfasi è posta sulla discussione tra i partecipanti, come opportunità di cambiare e acquisire nuovi significati attraverso il confronto, anche la discussione e la riflessione sulle pratiche e sui risultati della ricerca.

Parole chiave: pratiche/teorie/metodi, Practice-Research, Ricerca partecipativa, Creazione di conoscenza

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Main text

Introduction

Professionals in the early 21st century are required to practice more effectively amid the increasing challenges of uncertainty and complexity.
The widespread call for evidence-based practice is a major response to this.
Yet contemporary approaches to research often fail to produce adequate evidence or knowledge about practice for use in variable situations.

These words open the Salisbury statement on social work practice research (Salisbury Forum Group, 2011, p. 1) written in 2008 with an international group after the International Conference in Social Work Practice Research. A feeling of dissatisfaction was widespread, with the awareness that contemporary approaches to research often fail to produce adequate evidence or knowledge about practice for use in variable situations. The literature often highlights the gap between the knowledge of effective treatments and daily practices currently delivered. Several major reports agree that we know much about interventions that are effective but make little use of them to help achieve important outcomes for children, families and adults (Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman & Wallace, 2005). The gap seems to put research and practice on the opposite sides of the same bridge: "researchers argue that practitioners typically fail to draw on available research, and that practice lacks an evidence base. Practitioners argue that research is often irrelevant to their daily concerns, and that, in any case, they do not have the time or resources to review their practice in the light of evidence" (Fisher, 2011: 20). However, practitioners and researchers share a common interest in finding ways to improve practice. "This is the context in which evidence-based policy and practice appeared to offer the hope of greater certainty about what works, but this has rarely been delivered" (Helsinki Forum Group, 2014, p. 8). The limitations of the evidence-based approach have also been

recognized by several scholars. Shaw (2005) reports interesting shifts of emphasis: there are increasing references to the need to democratize the practitioner research process (Usher, 2004) or to balance evidence models with relationship models (Munson, 2004). Recently, Mullen (2016) criticized the mechanistic reasoning characteristic of the evidence-based tradition and called for a reconsideration of the centrality of practitioners' critical appraisal in making final judgments. ‘The Salisbury Forum Group’ suggests that the interest in Practice Research in Social Work "is bridging this gap between the world of research and the world of practice” (Salisbury Forum Group, 2011, p. 3).

The first definition of Practice-Research was revisited in 2012 in Helsinki, claiming that:

Practice research is not a specific research method but rather a meeting point between practice and research that needs to be negotiated every time and everywhere it is established. In essence, practitioners are not going to become researchers, nor will researchers become practitioners. What is critical and interesting is the exchange of perspectives.

A counter-colonization of the typical dominance of research over practice is assumed by Practice Research, confirmed also by the third reformulation of the statement:

Practice research is relational by its very nature and its human services context. By definition, it deals with the relationship between research and practice methods, between theory and practice and between the values and challenges of social work practice. Practice research, thus, reflects and emphasizes the relationship and interactions between researchers, practitioners and service users. (Epstein et al., 2015, p. 2)

The definitions of Practice Research show the extent to which the gap between theory and practice appears uncomfortable. They fail to explain how "*relationship and interactions between researchers, practitioners and service users*" is expected to take place. The emancipatory spirit towards ensuring that the social policies and/or practices are made more appropriate to respond to the people's needs is shared with the social sciences in general, that have the same sense of commitment to the resolution of social problems. Thus, as stated by L. Uggerhoj (2012: 79) the essential nature of Practice Research "is often recognized as unclear" with a "lack of consensus about what practice research includes and what lies outside its boundaries". The calls made by several scholars (e.g. Fook, Johannessen & Psoinos, 2011) for an eclectic methodology, without giving primacy to any one approach do not succeed in clarifying our understanding. The problem of the definition arises. A point can be found in L. Uggerhoj (2012: 67) when he affirms that "the basic foundation of Practice-Research is building theory from practice". The point is assumed here as a starting point in order to question how theory and knowledge are produced in the context where it will be used. A useful distinction is made by Gibbons et al. (1994) between Mode 1 and Mode 2 knowledge production. Mode 1 knowledge production is defined as building upon traditional research approaches guided by academic norms. Mode 2 tries to produce knowledge that is useful or relevant to practice. Such production of knowledge happens "when practitioners form networks, develop the perspectives, concepts and categories that are relevant to their needs". Practice Research becomes part of a collective learning process, "where practitioners use findings not merely as results but as part of developing everyday practice and methods" (Uggerhoy, 2012: 91).

Following these assumptions, Practice-Research could be better understood "as a set of processes that organize and qualify knowledge production across different institutional settings" (Rasmussen, 2012: 48)

This article, born within the European Conference of Social Work Research (ECSWR) held in Aalborg (Denmark) in 2017, aims to consider such "processes that organize and qualify knowledge production across three European experiences ~~of Practice-Research~~. The authors, members of the *Practice Research Special Interest Group* of the ESWRA, having participated in the symposium 'To question methods and pathways in producing and transferring knowledge from practice from three European Practice-Research Experiences', initiated a discussion about methodologies and processes used in their three European Practice Research experiences.

The Norwegian project set out to improve practice and social services for the NEET (not in education, employment or training) people aged 18–25. The Italian P.I.P.P.I. (Programme of Intervention for Prevention of Institutionalization) aimed to test new approaches for strengthening vulnerable families in the effort to reduce child neglect and out-of-home child placement. The Irish SEALS (Social and Economic Analysis of the use of Legal Services) project set out to investigate child protection systems and practices in order to understand what influences social workers' engagement with legal services.

The aim of the article is to define and analyze differences and commonalities in methodologies and processes in order to outline strategies for developing a fruitful encounter between practice and research. The analysis on the three research-practice experiences will follow three questions about knowledge production reformulated after the Salisbury Statement:

- Whether and how practitioners are involved in practice research.
- Whether practice research paths create knowledge that is useful for practitioners and service users.
- Whether practitioners are both users and creators of knowledge.

First European experience (Norway). The Norwegian example –Practice and knowledge development

To enhance the social welfare services in Norway, the Labour and Welfare Ministry developed a programme for practice and knowledge development (2013-2016). The aim was to improve the social welfare services and professional practice and to be more knowledge-based and effective. Experiences from a former university research and development programme for social services (HUSK, the Norwegian abbreviation) (Marthinsen, 2016; Austin &Johannessen, 2015; Fook, Johannessen & Psoinos, 2011) inspired the later programme as discussed here. Within both programmes, practice universities and users were all invited to enter into equal collaboration, in partnership. The latest programme aimed to test the practitioners´ working methods and develop relevant knowledge for practice. The research questions were; Do the methods work? What knowledge is produced for practice?

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Three local offices of Norwegian Labour and Welfare Service (NAV) in Mid-Norway that participated in the project, decided which working methods they wanted to test. The target group for the testing of working methods was young people aged between 18-25, with complex social problems and without employment, education and training (N.E.E.T.). This is a growing group, which challenges the labour and welfare services in Norway, as well as other countries. The tested methods needed to be efficient in clarifying the needs of the young people in the target group, and be supportive of employment, education or training, in order to fulfil the requirements of the state welfare policy. The tested working methods were: social group work in the form of a motivation and training course for four weeks; career consulting with standard manuals; support for employed deaf people and their employers by adapting work practices; skills in interdisciplinary collaboration; and finally, establishing a user council to strengthen the users` voice in

NAV. These working methods are well-known in social work theory and practice, but the participating practitioners in the project lacked experience and competences in these areas. The practitioners tested the working methods for a period of 1.5 years, collaborating with the researchers to develop the working methods and knowledge. The researchers documented the practice and the knowledge development and evaluated the tested working methods. In order for such practice research to take place, a close collaboration between the partners was required. The partners in practice research have different positions, competences and tasks in developing practice and knowledge (Moe, 2010). Collaboration between practitioners and researchers, to develop practice research, needs relationships of trust and respect (Ruch & Julkunen, 2016; Fouché, 2015). Neither the researchers nor the practitioners were experts on the tested working methods, but dialogue contributed to the development of methods to test. How to realize the methods in practice, how to collaborate, how to evaluate the methods and produce data l for knowledge-based practice became important topics in the dialogues.

Data was obtained from interviews, individually or in focus groups with all ten participating practitioners and users in three phases: in advance of testing the working methods, halfway through the process, and on completion of the testing period. In the first phase, the interviews with practitioners collected data about the challenges in practice, and what type of practice did they aim to improve. The halfway interviews were about their experiences with the working methods. In the last phase, the interviews focused on the practice and knowledge developed, and how effectively the methods worked. Similar interviews with a total of 120 users about their experiences, individually or in focus groups, took place in the same three phases. The practitioners welcomed and appreciated the interviews, which became an opportunity for professional discussions and development of both practice and knowledge. The users were also willing to discuss their experiences. Many of them expressed personal development and empowerment from

participating in a working method. During the project period, several seminars and workshops took place. The researchers presented knowledge and theories for further reflections on their relevance for practice. Preliminary analysis of data from all phases was also presented for further joint reflection between practitioners, users and researchers. These reflections facilitated critical engagement on practice and an enhanced understanding of theoretical concepts and habits, e.g. differentiating between processes and activities in social group work This made it easier to tailor individual interventions and adjust activities. Furthermore, the reflections were an important part of developing the data analysis. The project involved ten researchers

The researchers accommodated the practitioners` expectations, which was important for forming mutual relationships of trust and respect. The request for collaboration and negotiation on each of the partners` roles and tasks in the project clarified the expectations, although some surprises did occur, such as the practitioners' wish for standard manuals and demands for supervision in cases. They expected that manuals would make practice easier, which led to interesting reflections. The reflections on the preliminary analysis required the researchers` competence in understanding practice and to be able to highlight knowledge relevant for practice. Reflections on experiences between the parties in the project made provided the practitioners with more proof of their own knowledge and the importance of the users` involvement. The reflections allowed for new ways of understanding and differentiating concepts, making it easier to be critical of one`s own practice and to transform the knowledge to practice. Some practitioners in the social group work realized that they had focused too much on conducting the activities in the daily program and had paid less attention to the change processes for the youth. The research was intended as a social, dynamic and adaptive process facilitated in partnership between the involved actors. The produced knowledge in the project remained

and became a part of daily practice of participating practitioners. The users were empowered by participating in the user council and the project activities.

Knowledge production is characterized by knowledge exchange, knowledge interaction and knowledge mobilization (Nutley, Walter & Davis, 2007). The continued development of knowledge production is dependent on the learning and knowledge development processes in the organization of practice.

Second European experience (Italy). P.I.P.P.I. - Programme of Intervention for Prevention of Institutionalization

In Italy, despite the passing of several laws implementing the EU's recommendations to improve family services, the exclusive competence of local authorities on social affairs, the lack of resources and a bureaucratic culture have produced a miscellaneous context which, despite areas of excellence, is characterized by gaps and inequities.

In an effort to respond to this situation, since 2011 the Italian Ministry of Welfare has started a collaboration with the University of Padua, for implementing an innovative intervention strategy to prevent out-of-home child placement, the *Programme of Intervention for Prevention of Institutionalization.* Its abbreviation, *P.I.P.P.I.* was inspired by the fictional character Pippi Longstocking, a creative and amazingly resilient girl known all over the world. P.I.P.P.I. promotes the full, well-rounded development of the child by proposing new ways to respond to problems connected to poor-parenting.

The first and the second stages of the programme were each carried out over a two-year period (2011-2012; 2012-2013) in 10 Italian cities. Moreover, since 2014 four steps of scaling-up have begun (2014-2015, 2015-2016, 2016-2017, 2017-2018), involving 136 new cities (48 cities also for multiple periods). Thus, P.I.P.P.I. has involved approximately 2700 children, 2300 families and 3300 practitioners.

The P.I.P.P.I. aims to respond to children's needs with a collective action built around four specific activities (Serbati, Ius & Milani, 2016): (1) Home-care intervention, a twice a week in-home activity to support parenting capacities and parent-child relationships; (2) Parents' Groups, weekly or bi-weekly group activities fostering reflective practice, encouraging exchange and interaction between parents; (3) Family helpers are provided for each family to offer support in concrete aspects of daily life; (4) Cooperation between schools/families and social services/ teachers.

The specific activities are presented in the programme manual, but the aim is not to lead practitioners with standardized instructions. The manual presents guidelines developed from Evidence-Based programmes and initiatives such as *SafeCare*, *Grade Care Profile* and *EDIP-CF2* (Gershater-Molko, Lutzker, & Wesch, 2003; Carter, 2012; Lacharité, 2014) The fidelity of the implementation questions are considered in tension with the adherence to manual's instructions: such instructions could be modified according to the need for reinvention or adaptation, because modifications are necessary at sites to address individual and organizational needs (Dusenbury, Brannigan, Falco & Hansen, 2003~~)~~. The research question looks at verifying the effectiveness of the programme, including the analysis of participative actions where participants act upon the programme proposals and not simply apply them (Shaw & Holland, 2014), realizing the need for reinvention or adaptation.

There are three participative arenas where the actions proposed by the programme could be questioned and negotiated by the participants:

-the yearly training sessions conducted by the researchers with practitioners. Specifically, the three-day training sessions involving ten practitioners for each city; and the seven-day training sessions involving two practitioners for each city, in order to train people (called 'coaches') for assisting researchers during the implementation inside each city context. During the trainings, theories underpinning the programme are shared and

proposals of evidence-based actions are discussed. Through small group work, ways for implementing actions are discussed and reinvention and adaptation concepts are introduced and supported.

-the bi-monthly research gathering meetings between researchers and coaches (two researchers meet the coaches of 15 cities) and the monthly research gathering meetings between coaches and practitioners in each city. During the meetings, coaches and practitioners present innovations introduced and documented as an opportunity for participation, reflection and dialogue with the colleagues and with the researchers. A dialectic practice was developed in order to build new practical knowledge.

-the meetings of the 'Multidisciplinary Team' (one for each family involved), composed of by practitioners (from different disciplines: social workers, social pedagogues, psychologists) and families involved with the to implementation of the specific activities. The 'Multidisciplinary Team' is the place where the programme is reinvented and adapted, where innovations are built.

In the 'Multidisciplinary Team' research actions have a duel function: to verify the effectiveness of the programme (accountability), and to negotiate innovations towards the programme (reinvention and adaptation). Research instruments (e.g. questionnaires, care plan documentation, visual instruments to support interviews, see Milani et al., 2015) are central for both these functions: they are used directly by participants, in order to measure, improve and transform their practices in a path called participative and transformative evaluation (P.T.E. - Serbati, 2017; Serbati & Milani, 2013). When collecting data with the families, all parties take responsibility for the accountability dimension of the research, providing parties with a basis to discussthe innovations to be introduced, and to satisfy the reinvention and adaptation functions.

Fidelity of implementation is not concerned with realizing some absolute truth, as described in the manual. Participants work with the researchers in examining and

challenging the practical theories that are proposed by the programme or embodied in language and commonsense.

Similarly, using the research instruments, practitioners in the 'Multidisciplinary Team' become co-researchers with parents, teachers and other actors to agree the best strategies to realize the specific activities and respond to children's' needs.

In each participative arena data and information coming from the research instruments are used in negotiations, making the participants' perspectives explicit so as to discuss them with children, parents, practitioners and researchers. The intention is not simply to comply with the programme prescriptions but to utilize them as starting points to invent and re-think the daily practice, in order to find other ways of doing things. "The experimentation is open (avoids closures) to wide (welcomes the unexpected) and sincere (valorizes the differences) views" (Moss, 2012, p. 134). In the three participative arenas, participants start from the proposals of the P.I.P.P.I. to build new knowledge practices for practice. So, the P.I.P.P.I. invests greatly in the participants' ability to reflect, to think, to make choices, in short, to develop new cultures of practice.

Using data collected by practitioners, the research question about accountability function is fulfilled by a pre- post-test quasi experimental design employed to compare Time 0 families' situation at the intake and Time 1 at the conclusion. The results are encouraging (see Serbati, Ius & Milani, 2016).

However, documenting the reinvention and adaptation function still poses a great challenge for the P.I.P.P.I. Yearly focus groups with the coaches provide information about their perspectives. The results report a high satisfaction with the participative paths proposed by the programme, for example a manager of a child protection agency affirmed: "P.I.P.P.I. gives us the opportunity to think, to reflect, to learn from each other. And so, our actions become thicker and deeper because we have thought around them and we do this together".

But focus groups do not allow us to understand 'how' and 'to what extent' daily practices (also beyond the programme) have changed. Some understanding could derive from the huge amount of presentations of concrete experiences given by the practitioners during meetings, seminars and training days, which testify to the substantial reflections made by the practitioners during the P.I.P.P.I.

Third European experience (Ireland). SEALS - Social and Economic Analysis of the use of Legal Services by Tusla

Social work increasingly brings practitioners into contact with the legal system. Child welfare and protection practice, in particular, is viewed as the most legally intensive speciality within the social work profession. Over the last 25 years, the legal profession and the courts have come to play an increasingly prominent role in the handling of child protection and welfare cases in Ireland. While a voluntary pathway accounts for two thirds of cases, the remaining one third of involuntary care order decisions are made in the District Court. Despite this, relatively little research has been carried out on the interface between social services and the legal system in Ireland, besides the notable exceptions of Coulter (2015) and Burns et al (2017).

Taking a multidisciplinary socio-economic perspective, the SEALS study set out to develop a deeper understanding of child protection and welfare social workers' engagement with legal services. It was funded under the Irish Council's Research for Policy and Society scheme, with Tusla as the strategic partner. The scheme was intended for knowledge production, specifically to 'enable peer-reviewed research to underpin policy decisions, and to assist cultural and societal development (research.ie/funding/rfps/). The recommendations are intended to inform Tusla's future engagement with legal services, with related impacts upon outcomes for the children and families engaging with Tusla and upon social work education.

The methodology employed by the SEALS project was a multi-methods approach, using quantitative and qualitative techniques and combining new data generation with the analysis of existing economic data provided by Tusla.

A research oversight committee was established, comprised of the research team and representatives of Tuslai.e. practitioners, managers, legal representatives. Meeting quarterly over the course of the two-year project, it became a consultative forum where decisions relating to the design and enactment of the study were discussed and on occasion reviewed and revised. This oversight committee was constructed as a space where developments within the organisation, which were of relevance to the research, were shared and considered

Challenges that emerged throughout the research process were systematically addressed. For example, at the outset of the project, it was intended that there would be engagement with guardians *ad litem* (GALs). As the financial data was obtained, it transpired that the expenditure data relating to GALs pertained to just one agency, and analysis would therefore be incomplete and not representative of GAL spend in its entirety. Consequently, issues of data availability and (in)completeness were discussed at oversight committee meetings, as part of a deliberative and collaborative approach to making decisions about choice of research participants. By maintaining a dialogic space, presenting challenges were discussed and emerging tensions were collaboratively and constructively resolved. A key objective of the research team was to address all aspects of one of the approaches to practice research described by Uggerhøj (2011:49), wherein the focus is on 'the framework, goals and outcomes of the research process.' The implementation of the SEALS research findings, within the organisation, was a key objective and the establishment of the oversight committee was designed to assist this process. In the context of the SEALS research, the designation of 'practitioner' extends not only to the focus groups participants, interviewees and survey respondents, but also

to the representatives from Tusla's research office and management who contributed to the collaborative process of research design, all of whom were engaged in the process of knowledge production within the framework of the research.

The SEALS survey sought social workers' perspectives on their engagement with legal services. The online survey achieved a 27% return rate, which signified to the research team that participants related directly to the issues under consideration in SEALS and hence they were interested in actively contributing to this research.

While working closely with consultative team throughout the research project, the researchers' status as outsiders was significant in the process of knowledge production. Arguably, this outsider status and the design of the research methods, when taken together, facilitated the participant social workers to come to voice and to identify the challenges facing them in interdisciplinary work when engaging with legal services. The distance between the participants and the outsider researchers possibly helped to create a space for participants where negative responses and feelings of dissatisfaction could be articulated and recorded. The survey design enabled them to anonymously participate in the 'making public' of a discourse that could lead to the actualisation of organisational review and change. Participants were asked to comment on their personal experiences of engaging with the legal system in child care proceedings, and specifically to reflect and comment on the types and levels of agency support and training they receive. In their analysis of the responses, the researchers did not detect any significant social desirability bias; it is therefore reasonable to infer that social workers' critical agency was not compromised by fears associated with critiquing the system and organisation within which they work.

Findings highlight existing good practice and also areas of deficit in Tusla's induction, supervision, mentorship and continuing professional development practices. The requirement of the agency to effectively respond to the needs identified by

participants is clear, if they are to effectively support social workers to represent their professional competencies in the complex legal domain of child protection social work. By becoming involved in the research scheme, Tusla demonstrated its motivation towards engaging in a review of its policy around their use of legal services, an issue that has been highlighted in the recent Irish research Coulter (2015) and Burns et al (2017). The agency's active engagement in the facilitation of knowledge production through research, by enabling participation in that research by its employees, made this research possible. The SEALS study demonstrates the importance of researchers and agencies participating in a dialogic space throughout the research process, towards the realisation of the research objectives and actualising of the research findings. The results of the research have formed an important foundation for discussion and for the development of future agency policy and changes in service provision.

Discussion

As introduced in the first paragraph, the discussion about the Research-Practice experiences will follow the three questions about knowledge production reformulated after the Salisbury Statement.

Whether and how practitioners are involved in practice research.

Fook, Johannessen and Psoinos (2011, p. 31) distinguish between four typologies of participants' involvement in the research path: "as objects (where they are merely researched), as subjects (where their views are placed in the foreground of the research but ultimately the researcher decides on the 'validity' of these views), as social actors (where participants are agents who can act, change and be changed by their actions) and finally as active participants (where they lead the research process).

In the three research experiences, high levels of participation and involvement by practitioners can be recognized. In the Norwegian experience, they were involved as social actors during discussions with researchers about introducing new working methods and for the analysis of the interview findings. But they are also active participants; when they decide the working methods, they also decide the topic for research and the areas in which they wanted to develop more knowledge.

Similarly, the Italian P.I.P.P.I. programme involved practitioners as active participants, asking them to directly use research instruments, to collect, analyze and discuss data with other practitioners, families and researchers. Through this process, themes are uncovered and considered in depth between researchers and practitioners.

The Irish SEALS case study is slightly different. The experience presents an exploratory study for collecting new information about the relationship between child welfare and protection social work professional and legal services. Practitioners that took part in the survey are 'subjects' because their views are highlighted by the research, but through the TUSLA research unit they can also act as social actors and active participants making decisions on the research processes and realizing it.

The Norwegian and Italian experiences show processes that guide practitioners and/or service users in a learning process to reflect and act upon the theories in order to use the change practice (fig.1). They fully represent Practice Research model, which uses the theory for developing everyday practice and methods. The Irish experience represents a step before establishing a Practice-Research project, even if collaborative processes with the TUSLA research unit do represent a participatory model.

Fig. 1 The three cases according to the participants' involvement (Fook, Johannessen and Psoinos, 2011)

Whether practice research paths create knowledge that is useful for practitioners and service users.

The three experiences question how the available knowledge has to be used and produced in order to move and change ‘action’. They highlight that an instrumental use of knowledge (the classical 'what works'), defined externally by science, research or theory, is not sufficient (Habermas, 1984; Kemmis, 2001). Here, the theoretical discussion of professional practice remains far from real practice, which has no internal legitimacy with the reasons that explain the action or practice to be changed (Soulet, 2014). The aims of the three European experiences include the improvement of daily practices. The Norwegian and Italian experiences started from the proposal of good practices to practitioners. These practices were not only used by practitioners but they also became objects of discussion and reflection between practitioners and between researchers and practitioners. The knowledge produced by evidence is not the end of the story, but rather the starting point.

The Irish experience again realizes this albeit at a different point of reference: it sets out to identify the use of legal services in child protection practice, questions emerge in the research process about the practice itself. The participative process of the research, enabled participants to make public their experiences, thus enabling their voices to be heard through the research process, both within and outside the organization. How the SEALS findings will be implemented acting upon the knowledge produced to change/transform cultures of child protection practice, has yet to be determined.

The Norwegian and Italian programmes involve not only practitioners, but also service users, in a knowledge production that guides and informs choices regarding their daily life. Service users are involved in a research process that requires comparing and discussing the implicit habits and theories that guide their lives, with the new proposals made by the programmes.

Creating knowledge that is useful for practitioners and service users asks for learning processes that create internal legitimacy for the use of the knowledge not through application of theories proposed, but through acting upon the theories and transforming them in practical theories to be used in action (fig. 2).

Fig. 2 The three cases according to the use of knowledge (Habermas, 1984; Kemmis, 2001; Soulet, 2014)

Whether practitioners are both users and creators of knowledge.

The Norwegian experience makes it clear how the practitioners were users of a proposed knowledge (the working methods), but they worked on it and during the process it became practical knowledge. The same happened to the P.I.P.P.I. practitioners, who experienced not only a working method, but also used the research instruments and realized the research path. Thus, acting upon research methods allowed them to apply and change the knowledge initially proposed by the programme. The Irish experience is quite traditional in the research approach for many of its actions and in this way it can be understood as a step before establishing a Practice-Research project. Only in the TUSLA research unit do practitioners participate in the decisions about research design, collaborating with researchers towards the collection of knowledge about professional practices. In the Norwegian and Italian experience and in the Irish Tusla Research Unit, the vision of knowledge as a tool to be applied in practice is overcome. Each project considers the use of knowledge by the participant in relation to its context, and to other people. Knowledge is used in a communicative way (Habermas, 1984) giving centrality to dialogue (Fig. 3). It is a knowledge that is built where the action takes place, which is changed collectively and that becomes part of the learning process of each person involved. In the three experiences practitioners examined and developed a more explicit

understanding about the knowledge they use in practice, and how they make sense of events and situations. Their experiences and interpretations are important factors in developing new knowledge to make sense of practice, building the practice and thus affecting knowledge production. Knowledge and knowledge processes entail interaction and dialogue, which in turn establish arenas for knowing in partnership and establishing contextual and creative knowledge-production (Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2012).

Fig. 3 The three cases according to the use of knowledge (Habermas, 1984)

Conclusions

The reflections made about the three experiences suggest that central to building practical knowledge to bridge the gap between theory and practice is to offer opportunities for practitioners to discuss and reflect on the practices and research results originated by their practices. Thus, practice-research pathways seem not to be linked to a specific research methodology, but rather to ensure that knowledge produced in practice by practitioners will remain in practice, in opposition to the traditional approach to research. The central importance given to dialogue, discussion and reflection creates the opportunity to negotiate what kind of knowledge is needed in order to move and change the ‘practice’. Participants in the three experiences became co-researchers in examining and challenging the research proposals with respect to those already embodied in their practice. As in Julkunen's words (2011, p. 64), they "build a bridge between the culture of experts and everyday life, and therefore enrich and challenge different perspectives that might have been taken for granted. Dialogue could thus be seen as a tool that enhances practitioners’ self-understanding of their practice". This involves challenging the knowledge proposed externally by science and theory and creating new knowledge to be used in practice that needs to be questioned and changed through dialogue over time.

This is close to Dewey's (1933) assumptions, with the notion that people change and gain meaning through interacting.

After the three research experiences, the discussion introduces three views (Serbati, 2017; Serbati, 2018) about the knowledge production and utilization. The first view considers the knowledge that is *externally* produced: the focus is technical, instrumental, searching for examples and proposals of 'what works'. The second view refers to knowledge that is *internally* produced by participants for their own practical theories and that impacts their decision-making. The first and the second views need the third one to be effective. It is built on *communication*, in a way that permits people to forge their practical theories through consensus and co- ordination on the basis of 'what works' proposals.

The article has considered the "building theory from practice" of the Practice-Research tradition, focusing on the processes that build (practical) theories. In the three examples, Practice-Research is carried out through individual and collective learning processes and through dialogue. The content of such processes are recognizable in the research proposals (theory) and the realization of these processes was done by inviting participants to act upon proposals made by research. The analysis for understanding how to bridge the gap between theory and practice has been placed in the field of practice. The question of whether and how such (practical) theories could return to research, how they could be gathered and whether and how they could contribute to the advancement of knowledge, remains open. Also, the differentiation of external/internal/communicative knowledge production is only an initial suggestion that could be useful to expand or modify the evolving definition of Practice-Research, focusing more on communication, dialogue between people and giving centrality to groups. It is also missing an in-depth understanding of involved participants' perceptions (practitioners, service users, service managers) about how they experienced participatory processes and about its usefulness.

Further research and studies could enhance our understanding of how these foci could support a better comprehension of the Practice Research relationship.

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