

EFFECTIVENESS AND PRACTICE-BASED INQUIRY

Saurama, Erja, University of Helsinki, Department of Social Research, POB 18, FI-00014 University of Helsinki, Finland, erja.saurama@helsinki.fi

Laine, Terhi, Diaconia University of Applied Sciences, Sturenkatu 2, FI-00510 Helsinki, Finland, terhi.laine@diak.fi

Abstract

This paper has been written from inside practice research. To put it shortly, the concept means practice-based knowledge production which has its relevance for practice. We compare this view point to the effectiveness language which is dominating the national-level social welfare programmes in Finland. We use the notion compulsion of practice to highlight the importance of taking the practice into consideration when the effectiveness is at stake. Usually knowledge produced via practice will change the way we understand the world, producing knowledge is a way of experiencing the world. By the data we use we try to concretise the difference between the objectives of the national wide development programme and the knowledge which springs up from practice.

Keywords: practice research, knowledge production, compulsion of practice, pragmatism

Accepted to the International Workshop on Practice Research in Helsinki, June 8, 2011

1 Introduction

During the postmodern time the idea of knowledge and its production has changed and has become more diverse. On the one hand the knowledge and research produced by the service users have been accepted while the demand of evaluation and effectiveness which is based on the scientific knowledge dominates. The latter one wells from economical demands. Social work is a part of this changing world. Clear evidence and charge of accountability are required (Juhila 2009). Often this demand will come from outside the immediate field of social work, from the local governments' and other financiers' side. Social work's own knowledge production has been developed simultaneously from two directions: inside the profession and a special branch of research which is named as practice research of social work (Satka et al. 2005; Saurama & Julkunen 2010).

In the time of scarce economic resources the development of social work depends heavily on financing received for separate projects. One can even talk about the pressure of development, because of the changed structure of financing the municipalities through the state budget. The state money for the basic functions of the municipalities is decreased at the same time of increasing the sums of money for the development programmes. Until the year 2011 the framework of the social work has been defined by the policy programmes, one of which is the national development programme of social welfare and public health, KASTE 2008-2011. Some of its central objectives are 1) increasing participation and decreasing marginalization, 2) narrowing of welfare differences and 3) the improvement of the quality, availability and effectiveness of the services. The realisation of the objectives is measured with different quantitative indicators. (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2008; Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2009.)

The KASTE-programme has financed the Child's Voice development programme the purpose of which is to develop the structures of the services which promote the welfare and participation of the children and adolescents and prevent marginalisation by improving models and their effectiveness. The objectives are also to strengthen cooperation between social, health, education and youth services, other service producers and the third sector. Furthermore, an attempt is made to develop and to create good practices to be disseminated and finally, to develop the professionals' know-how and expertise. (The Child's Voice Development Programme 27.12.2008.)

In this article we scrutinise the knowledge character which rises of the practices and its relation to the hegemonic manner of speaking which emphasises effectiveness. We ask what kind of knowledge the work of the practical social services produces when taking practice-based knowledge production seriously. We use the term the compulsion of practice in order to highlight the difference between the practice view point and the programmatic preliminary knowledge. The examples have been taken from a project (A Child's Voice at School 2008) which was one of the 16 subprogrammes of the whole Child's Voice programme. One objective of this subproject was to add extra support for the pupils in the school environment by organizing students' field practice into the elementary schools.

2 Practice-based knowledge and the compulsion of practice

In the research and development activities we can have idealistic objectives of effectiveness and efficiency of the different models and forms of activity but practical life does not strengthen our thoughts. It is easy to understand the wish of the decision-makers responsible for the offering of social services to find the instrument which is based on the rational consideration of what works, to whom and in what circumstances and where to invest to accomplish the biggest advantage. That is the

seductive promise of evidence-based practice (EBP). Lot of critics in the sphere of social work research have argued that there is no evidence that EBP is fulfilling those expectations which have been put to it in social work (e.g. Taylor & White 2001; Webb 2001, van de Luitgaarden 2009). When evidence based practice is legitimating research knowledge, simultaneously it captures knowledge as the instrument of the power.

However, social work practice is based also to intuition, to experience learning and to the moral consideration which can be caught only in the practice-based way of acquisition of knowledge, and which effectiveness language does not catch because it stands too far from practice. In the social work the service users are met in unique situations. More than research knowledge one needs consciousness of the principles which direct assessment and transparency to the grounds of which decisions are made in direct social work.

Carolyn Taylor and Susan White (2001, 37-59) emphasise that social work is as much a practical-moral activity as it is a technical-rational one, and it must be based on a wide reflexive consideration. The subject of the criticism of Taylor and White is that social work is based on different kinds of rationalities, not only an objective, external and pre-existing given rationality (ibid. 40). They argue that behind the purposes of evidence-based practice there is “a quest for (and assumption of the existence of) certainty” (ibid. 40). The assumption of certainty is based on the correspondence theory of truth; so that we would have a free entrance to the reality and it would not be tied up with language and its limitation in transmitting of reality (ibid. 43). However, the claim of Taylor and White is that language is performative, people use language artfully in order to promote the matters wanted by it and to present themselves in a positive light (ibid. 44). How the matters have really taken place has stayed only on the personal reporting of different observers.

In practice-based knowledge formation the knowledge is based on its own practical activity produced by the practitioners. In a positive case when people have become interested in scrutinizing their own work they might also become interested in what has been said before of similar situations. The phrase “learning by doing” presented by the American pragmatist John Dewey (1929) represents a kind of learning method from practice but unfortunately often it has come to mean the method of the “try and mistake”, describing the really troublesome way of learning and finding something new.

John Dewey was an untiring spokesman of the practice-based knowledge formation. He criticised the fact that theory is often heightened at the expense of practice; the knowing is raised above making and doing. Pragmatism is trying to overcome these kinds of dualisms. It teaches us that theory and practice are overlapping; they need each other to reach the goal, but goal is not the truth – it is “warranted assertability”. That is why the weight of the experience as a tester of the knowledge is central according to the pragmatists.

C.S. Peirce talked about experience as a brute power which will come to the reality of the human being as an external compulsion (see Bernstein 2010). The experience is a severe teacher who compels to change preconceptions in order to adopt new ways of thinking and acting models. The compulsion of practice means “hard facts”, hard world, it means that you have experienced something different compared to your prejudices or your prior understanding. When applying the idea to the research work it means that the outcome will not be the truth but the warranted assertability which has been achieved by subtle and reflexive analysis of practice. The concept of the compulsion of practice can be understood as a description of the nature of practice, how the world is affecting us.

In this paper we suggest that it is possible to use social constructionism (epistemology) hand in hand with pragmatism (ontology). We consider social constructionism as a perspective, how we interpret our research material. According to it, the speech is the interviewee's interpretation of the reality and only some items are to be named. The research subject is significances which have been socially constructed not social facts. (See Burr 1998 14-18; Jokinen & Juhila & Pösö 1995, 9-13; Saurama

2002, 45.) There are strong and weak constructionism. This study is based on weak constructionism, which means that the knowledge is constructed but at the same time it carries something from the social world as such. Pragmatism can be understood as a mediating perspective in the dispute of constructionism. Although pragmatism does not deny the existence of the biological structure of the human being it does not suppose that biology is determining cultural interpretations. For instance Mead thought that we can easily be satisfied with the fact that outside our observations there is an objective world which is independent of the observer. However, when we are obliged to act and to make decisions we are doing interpretation about reality which has been symbolically conveyed to us (Joas 1996).

3 The practice refuses of settling to a ready-made framework – the description of the example project

This example describes a project in which Bachelors of Social Services students trained at comprehensive schools where pupils are from seven to twelve years old. Those students are studying at a University of Applied Sciences. The data consists of the interview material focused on the students' experiences about participating in the Child's Voice in School development Programme.

In Finland there are school social workers at the comprehensive schools. One school social worker is responsible for several schools, where there are hundreds of pupils in each of them. The social worker has quite a little time to work in one school, about one or two days per week. She/he works with children and families who have many problems and need a lot of support.

Three elementary schools from the metropolitan area participated to the programme. The objectives of the project were 1) empowering the children, the sub teens and their families 2) strengthening of the partnership between home and school. The goal was that during the project communality at school strengthens and the risks of the marginalisation can be reduced. All in all the pupils of comprehensive school got more support than before during the school day. The target groups were pupils especially at the transitional stage, in other words pupils on the first and second classes and on the fifth and sixth classes. These children are 7-8 and 11-12 years old.

Students supported the children and did a different kind of work than school social workers. We can describe their work as a preventive child welfare work. They worked with children's' groups and were present during a school day, especially during the breaks and lunch time so that pupils had possibility to come and talk to them. Students organized games during breaks and they tried to improve team spirit in the classes. Furthermore they were responsible for clubs after the school day. Some of these functions have been directed to the children with special needs. For example in the clubs there were children recommended by the local child protection agency. The peer group activity directed to the parents was started at the school as morning coffee meetings. They were organized by the students and they were class-specific, meaning that the teacher, the parents and the pupils had time to encounter to each other.

Students did their thesis, community analyses and development tasks at school. The idea was to get the voice of the children and the adults near-by heard. Students examined and modelled also forms of activity.

The compulsion of practice will be examined with the help of three extracts. The first and the second extracts are examples of which the speech is based through the reflection of the student's own action whereas the third extract represents how a student interprets the situation and feelings of child. The first and the third extracts are narrations where you can find a beginning and an end.

In the interview speech the students recall the events during their practice training, which was already over. They situate themselves and the pupils in the speech episode. Sometimes they describe families of children and they also describe a social reality in short statements.

Interviewed: Fact is that it is not so big a story. Otherwise it will go easily too difficult to the children. It seems that it was that big learning entity for me in the spring.
Before I went to training, I thought it is something fine and fantastic.
Then little by little I realized what they [children] need, what they would like, how those families and children are got to it along.
It was nice to notice that it is not always so big and fine, what they need. (H3, OP3)

In the previous extract the student analyses the practice made by her at the school. In the story there are a beginning and an end. At the initial stage the student's thought and expectation are that the action is something very fine and extraordinary. These expectations may come through theoretical and conceptual objectives of teaching even though the student does not bring out this in her own speech. In the field practice the student notices how "small" is "big" to the child, what is big to the child cannot be estimated from the adults' world. The practice compels the student to change her idea; even so that it will become the student's biggest learning experience during the practising period. If the activities start from the adult's needs and not from the child's, it can become too difficult to the child.

The story can be interpreted as a moral and ethical contention in which the subject position of a child and his/her family defines the situation-specific activity. The student expresses it by stating that the activity has to be directed towards the needs of the children and the families. The practitioner – and in this case the student – has to understand the world of a child and his/her family, which is the precondition of success. The student's and the child's worlds are based on this reciprocal interaction. At the end of the story, the student evaluates what had taken place because the ideas of doing something big and magnificent had proved to be wrong.

The next extract continues the same theme and tries to capture the notion of effectiveness:

Interviewer: Did you notice possibly that your action would be effective from the children's view, positively or negatively or what were linkages for change in the children's situations?

Interviewed: Teachers if they gave good feedback [for me] said, " Your presence here has facilitated my work" so unavoidably it affects to the children. They are those invisible results.

However, it is important to the children. Of course there are experiences of the success. There are small issues and somebody could say that they were too small, but I myself know where's to go.

There can be different children, needing special care. Then even small deals can be those results. But it's pretty hard to pick up any big achievements.

(H3, Op5)

The interviewer asks from the student the effects of the activity which could estimate the change in the children's situations. The student answers by his experience. In the practice training conclusions can be drawn from the effects of other practitioners, and in this case, of feedback from the teachers. The student considers the effects as invisible results. At the same time he produces the two different worlds. In the background there is a thought that from the outside the activities could be defined rather

trivial. The knowledge formation indeed is different looking from inside because there one knows how to go on. In practice a child's message to the adults' world is that the small issues are important. The contrast is interesting because the children with whom the student works have been defined as the children who need special and extra support.

The last extract describes the work with the families. The school staff meets the parents of the pupils about twice a term. Those meetings take place in evenings. It is customary that those parents are actively participating whose children haven't got any problems. Often these parents have relatively good social status. Some of the students trained at school in which there were many children of immigrant background. Those parents were not always willing to come to the school.

In a class there are pupils whose parents the teacher had never met. Then the students started a new form of activity where pupils invited parents to the school in a morning session. In those meetings there was not a strict schedule, instead the teacher and the parents had a cup of coffee and a nice time of chatting to each other. The students made a suggestion of sending an invite to the parents in their native language which the pupils had made. The invite began: "We are waiting for you at school".

Interviewer: Let's continue from the child's point of view. How would you concretise, how did you identify those needs of the children, in what way you showed your presence and how did you try to promote the participation? How did it concretely take place?

Interviewed: There was a boy, we were talking about different cultures, and his family was immigrant. So he did not want to talk about it and he was ashamed of his cultural background. He did not want to write an invitation card with his own native language, welcome.

His mother had never visited the school and the teacher had never seen her.

When this morning session started it happened so that the mother and the aunt and the younger sister came in. This boy was really tensed. He thought that if they came, what would happen.

They were a little bit late, and when that family came, we said: "wow, fine that you came". We were very happy about the fact that they came.

That boy, he was so happy that his family had been accepted.

I still remember the situation. We were chatting and the family was encouraged to talk more. We said that their Finnish is quite good and "you are okay". Somehow the situation was so important to the boy. His family was accepted. It was surely very important to him.

(H3OP3)

The extract above comprises a story in which there are the beginning and the end. At the initial stage the interviewer asks about the children's participation which she asks to be concretised. The student's story starts from a situation in which they talk with pupils about cultural differences. At the same time they are making the invitation cards. The student tells that one of the pupils of the class does not want to do the invite at all. The interviewed constructs that the pupil is ashamed and does not want to talk about his own culture. The beginning can be interpreted so that two groups exist, "we" and "the others". The pupil with his family belongs to "the others". At least the student thinks that the pupil feels so. The borderline of two different groups can be pinpointed in the fact that the boy's mother had never visited the school. The student tells, that the tension experienced by the boy will extend as far as the morning meeting begins. The child's mother, aunt and sister arrive. The interviewed constructs that

after the beginning the boy's experience was that of being accepted when his extended family was accepted. The situation can be interpreted as an experience in which the barrier between the two groups falls. The participation of a child and his/her family goes hand in hand.

In the previous examples we can find the field of significances which is shaped by three elements: the student as an actor, the child and his/her subjectivity and the external conditions of work. The students describe their own agency as tiny and even invisible. The compulsion of practice can be recognized for example in situations where the practitioner tries to respond to the child's needs. She/he must give up her ideals and to be sensitive to the child's voice.

The last angle of the practice triangle is the external pressure set for the work the students have to internalise. One can talk about the collective consciousness even among the students. They express it so that there is an idea from the extravagant story or from the great achievement which does not fulfil in practice. Why not? Because of the child's perspective. The fact is that in order to become happy the child needs visibly small things.

The task given the students was to analyse the effectiveness of their practising period. This showed to be almost "mission impossible" because their experiences did not fit to the preconceptions. The interviews done by the researchers showed that when studying questions like effectiveness, you need to operationalize concepts you use and make them suitable for practice. So the project was a learning experience for the students as well as for the researchers.

4 Conclusion

We have described in the paper the experiences of students training at school and simultaneously participating to a development programme the Child's Voice which belongs to the national social welfare and health care development programme KASTE. The main idea of the programme is to increase the effectiveness of social services. The designing and evaluation method chosen for the Child's Voice programme is logical framework which is a quantitative evaluation method. Its rationalisation schedule cannot however catch up the essence of the social work activities. Practice is the test factor. The great learning experience cannot be reached if you are not a good learner, it means that you have to take advantage what the practice wants to teach you and you are ready to give up your ready-made classifications and diagnoses. This is what we have called the compulsion of practice.

The example project in our article shows challenges of measuring the outcomes. In these kinds of massive programmes there are so many levels of interpretations that if these are not to be taken into consideration the results will be of no relevance. If the actors' experiences are to be taken seriously the methods used in evaluating programmes should be diversified.

References

- Bernstein, Richard J. (2010) *The Pragmatic Turn*. Polity Press, Cambridge
- Burr, Vivien (1998) *Overview: Realism, Relativism, Social Constructionism and Discourse*. In Parker, Ian (ed.) *Social Constructionism, discourse and realism*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage
- The Child's Voice Development Programme (2008) *Lapsen ääni -kehittämishjelma Suunnitelma Kaste-ohjelman toteuttamiseksi Etelä-Suomessa lasten, nuorten ja lapsiperheiden palvelujen osalta 27.12.2008*. *Unpublished*
- Dewey, John (1929) *The Quest for Certainty. The Study of the Relation of Knowledge and Action. The Collected Works of John Dewey. Later works. vol 4*.
- Jokinen, Arja, Juhila, Kirsi & Pösö, Tarja (1995) *Sosiaalityö, asiakkuus ja sosiaaliset ongelmat: Konstruktionistinen näkökulma*. Helsinki: Sosiaaliturvan keskusliitto
- Joas, Hans (1996) *The Creativity of Action*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Juhila, Kirsi (2009) *Selontekovelvollisuus*. Janus
- Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (2008) *Sosiaali- ja terveydenhuollon kansallinen kehittämishjelma, KASTE 2008-2011*. Helsinki: Sosiaali- ja terveysministeriön julkaisu 2008:6
- Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (2009) *Kasteohjelman valtakunnallinen toimeenpanosuunnitelma vuosille 2008-2011*. Helsinki: Sosiaali- ja terveysministeriö selvityksiä 9:2009.
- Satka, Mirja, Karvinen-Niinikoski, Synnöve, Nylund, Marianne & Hoikkala, Susanna (2005) *Sosiaalityön käytäntötutkimus*. Helsinki: Palmenia-kustannus
- Saurama, Erja (2002) *Vastoin vanhempien tahtoa*. Research Series 7. City of Helsinki Urban Facts.
- Saurama, Erja & Julkunen, Ilse (2010) *Approaching practice research in theory and practice*. Forthcoming in 'Practice research in Nordic Social Work – knowledge production in transition' Editors: Edgar Marthinsen and Ilse Julkunen. Whiting & Birch. *Unpublished*
- Taylor, Carolyn & White, Susan (2001) *Knowledge, Truth and Reflexivity. The Problem of Judgement in Social Work*. *Journal of Social Work*. 1(1):37-59
- Luitgaarden, Guido van de (2009) *Evidence-Based practice in Social Work: Lessons from Judgement and Decision-Making Theory*. *British Journal of Social Work* 39, 243-260
- Webb, Stephen (2001) *Some Considerations on the Validity of Evidence-Based Practice in Social Work*. *British Journal of Social Work* 31, 57-79