

## INTRODUCTION

This special issue of the *Journal of Evidence-Informed Social Work* emerges from a major research and development program in Norway that featured locally defined collaborative projects designed to improve the delivery of public social services. Spanning 6 years (2006–2011) and supported by substantial funding from the national government (\$10 million) with minimal directives, HUSK (the Norwegian abbreviation of “The University Research Program to Support Selected Municipal Social Service Offices”) represents an unusual opportunity to document the unfolding of a “bottom-up” research and development (R&D) program with project funds sent to four local universities to coordinate projects located in municipal social service departments and their related nonprofit partners.

The HUSK projects can be viewed within the context of evidence-informed practice, namely, research, practice wisdom (tacit and explicit), and client or service user voice needed to develop practice knowledge. The growing international recognition of the importance of evidence to inform practice is clearly displayed in the HUSK projects. For example, the government funding priorities clearly indicated the importance of capturing the involvement and voices of service users. In a similar way, the HUSK funding priorities sought to reflect more “light” on the nature of practice wisdom as displayed by service providers with the goal of identifying practices that would contribute to improvements in the delivery of social services. And finally, researchers and research needed to play a central role in the HUSK projects in order to capture lessons learned and promote knowledge development. In essence, all three legs of the evidence-informed practice “stool” needed to be in place in order to achieve the policy-driven outcome of improved services.

While the research dimensions of HUSK needed far more time and support than could be provided within a 6-year time frame (innovations often need time to evolve, and funding and guidance on evaluation would have required more support), the major contributions of HUSK relate primarily to increased practice wisdom and service user involvement. The articles in this special issue explore these contributions by paying attention to: (a) a national experiment to identify evidence-informed practices embedded in a national policy and program to improve the quality of services (rarely seen in the United States), (b) unique three-way collaborations (service user, provider, and academic) carried out in the midst of major governmental reorganization that provided a venue for examining how evidence informed initiatives are shaped by their organizational environments, and (c) an opportunity to explore the complexities of structured dialogue, agency–university collaboration as venue for shared learning and teaching, and a laboratory for R&D efforts to improve service quality.

The story behind this special issue began with a coauthored article by Asbjorn Johannessen (Fook, Johannessen, & Psoinis, 2011) reporting on the early stages of the HUSK experience that was followed up by Mike Austin with interviews of selected HUSK team leaders in Norway during June of 2012, six months after the end of HUSK funding. It became important to both of us that we find a way to analyze the HUSK experience in order to share the results with an international audience. We found the resources to bring together a group of scholars to explore the HUSK experience in June of 2013 in a small conference at the University of California, Berkeley, where each participant shared their preliminary analyses based on the translation and abstraction of a representative sample of HUSK projects. The conference provided a unique opportunity to bring together Nordic and American scholars to

focus on a common topic in the form of the HUSK projects and to replicate the candid and open sharing process that appeared in many of the HUSK projects themselves.

## THE NATURE OF HUSK

The cases selected for this special issue represented the involvement of academics (educators and researchers), service providers (social work practitioners), and service users of public social services (primarily the unemployed). The practice wisdom emerging from the interaction of service users, service providers, and academics represents an unusual experiment in finding ways to improve services by transforming practice. HUSK projects provided an unusual opportunity to engage three different groups that are often separated “in silos” based on power, social class, social policies, and different definitions of “expertise.” The results included learning more about each other, identifying shared interests, learning how to negotiate differences or challenges, and engaging in an uncommonly shared experience of experimentation.

While service providers seek to learn as much as possible about the needs of individuals receiving services, they rarely experience the opportunity to hear representatives of the collective voices of service users. As a result, social work educators are challenged to find ways to incorporate the expertise of service user experience into the education programs for future practitioners. Similarly, while researchers may experience a somewhat distant understanding of the experiences of service users by means of their tools of interviewing, focus groups, surveys, and administrative data, they rarely experience the voices of service users through more extended experiences of participant observation.

A second context of evidence-informed practice relates to the unique window into the efforts of a public social service system seeking to find new ways to improve services. The HUSK projects often challenged the tacit knowledge and wisdom of service providers by placing service users at the center of the demonstration projects. This form of empowerment represents something qualitatively different and perhaps more substantial than what emerges from traditional applied research that relies on the principles of community-based participatory action research used by “pracademics” (researchers seeking to understand practice). Another unique addition to the world of service providers was the inclusion of academics as participants and not just in their traditional outside observer–reporter roles. Given the current status quo where the collective voices of service users are generally ignored, service providers operate under considerable constraints that are often misunderstood or ignored, and academics are isolated in the “ivory tower of university life,” the HUSK projects remind us of the importance of the service user in the provision of social services, the search for new and innovative approaches to educating future practitioners, and the emergence of social work practice research conducted with and by service providers and users.

Buried in the lessons emerging from the HUSK projects are the following seeds of transforming social service delivery: (a) renewed attention to the importance of dialogue within the context of bureaucratic encounters, (b) sharing the design and delivery of social services with service users, (c) the profound changes in the classroom experiences of future practitioners, and (d) the sharing of the research enterprise by incorporating the perspectives of service users (increasingly referred to as “survivor research” in the United Kingdom where

service users are in charge of the research process and use the mantra “nothing about us without us”).

## DIALOGUE AS MEANS AND ENDS

Since dialogue is a central feature of all of these transformative processes, we briefly explore this area (elaborated upon in the articles) by drawing upon the pioneering work of Seikkula and Arnkil (on dialogue) as well as Engestrom (1999) and others (on the activities of social workers and others). Seikkula and Arnkil (2006) and Seikkula, Arnkil, and Ericksson (2003) focus on the goals of dialogue between a service user and a service provider (along with references to other applications). These major goals include: (a) generating safety and minimizing anxiety in order to increase predictability in communications by focusing on the future, (b) demonstrating a genuine interest in what service users are saying by focusing less on what the service providers think that service users need to know, (c) responding to what is said through active listening and paraphrasing in search of the natural rhythm of the dialogue in which to participate, and (d) seeking to capture the service users’ own subjective view of their situation in order to guarantee that everyone in the dialogue is using her or his own voice.

In addressing these goals, they have sought to transform the traditional language surrounding “client problems” where the focus is primarily on the service user to the newer language of “shared worries” (subjective zones of worries from small, medium, and large). In this context, both service users and service providers bring their own shared worries to the dialogue (normative for everyone to possess worries) for the exploration, clarification, and mutual understanding needed for shared efforts to address the needs of service users. The goal is to explore the shared process of helping each other play a role in reaching the goal of self-sufficiency (related to employment) and well-being (related to health and behavioral health) in which the service users’ network of resources is as important as the service providers network of services. This process of mutually assisting each other through shared worries can lead to transformative experiences for ALL parties when people recognize the humanity required in creating and delivering services to “our neighbors in need” and the realization that we all are changed by the experience of learning from each other.

## THE USE OF ACTIVITY THEORY TO INFORM PRACTICE

Another approach to transforming social service practices can be found in the work of Engestrom (1999), and many of their ideas are captured by Foot in this issue. In their efforts to understand practice (called “change laboratories”), they focus on the need to change by seeking to capture the contradictions of the past and the present in order to create a new model for practice that needs to be tested before it is implemented and disseminated in the form of codified rules of engagement as a way to teach others. Their core concepts include specifying the key actors (e.g., service user and service provider) and their focus on a desired outcome; the identification of the procedures or mechanisms (e.g., tools) needed to achieve the outcome; the norms and resources needed for collaborative work; the larger community that supports both parties; and the roles and expectations assumed by both parties. All of these elements are part of the pioneering work carried out under the framework of Cultural

Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), middle range theory that has considerable potential for explaining and evaluating social work practice.

## CONCEPTUAL TOOLS FOR TRANSFORMING PRACTICE

The continuing struggle to improve or transform social work practice within an environment of increased accountability focuses new attention to the balance between the relational and the informational aspects of practice. The relational dimensions rely on the centrality of relationship building and maintenance that is a central tenet of effective social work practice. However, the central concept of “effective use of self” is now broadened to include the service user as a partner in sharing “worries” and the collaborative search for resources needed to address a wide range of situations or problems experienced by the service user. In contrast, the informational dimension of service delivery also needs to be broadened beyond the accountability demands associated with the expenditure of public funds addressed by service providers to include the documentation and utilization of the storytelling process utilized by service providers. Storytelling is even gaining greater attention when nonprofits in the United States share their quantitative accountability data with their funders along with one or more stories about the clients being served. The HUSK projects highlight these issues that are illustrated in Figure 1 in terms of their interrelationships.

While practitioners have made significant progress in incorporating the increased amount of reporting and documenting service delivery within the context of rapidly changing technology, little attention has been given to redefining the relational aspects of practice, especially related to the power of the service provider over the service user. As one HUSK project team leaders noted when asked about the lessons that she had learned since completing her social work degree 10 years earlier, she wished that more attention had been given in her social work courses to the role of power in the delivery of public social services.

Many of the themes related to dialogue, power, and shared activities are reflected in this volume. As noted in the lead article, nearly all HUSK reports were written in Norwegian. So, what might be some lessons learned from the HUSK experience relevant to the United States and possibly internationally?

- Traditional top-down government policy and grant making needs to be balanced with bottom-up strategies designed to promote innovation without the expectation of elaborate a priori evaluation design expectations because all innovators know that change unfolds in unexpected ways but careful qualitative documentation is essential for replication.
- Capturing the collective voices of service users is a complex process that evolves slowly and requires both patience and skill to manage the perception-checking and relationship-building processes.
- Transforming practice is equally complex when it comes to unlearning old approaches and designing untested new approaches needed to rebalance the power differential between the expertise of service providers and expertise of service users.
- Transforming the university education programs, let alone research traditions, is equally complex but necessary to prepare the next generation of service providers to

engage service users in a fundamentally different way (e.g., outside the office, using different language, and monitoring the exercise of power).

- Transforming the programs that seek to prepare practice researchers in order to experience more substantial immersion in practice in order engage in practice-informed research and to promote research-informed practice.
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<b>Purpose of Dialogue ⇒ Key Participants ↓</b>	<b>Informational— Instrumental</b>	<b>Relational—Shared sensemaking</b>
Views of Service User	Storytelling	Valuing experience/expertise
Views of Service Provider	Documentation and use of evidence to inform practice	Promoting self-sufficiency and well-being
Views of Service Managers	Accountability	Promoting innovation
Views of Educators/Researchers	Outcome assessment and dissemination	Engaging in practiceinformed research and teaching

FIGURE 1 Multiple perspectives of the informational and relational aspects of social work practice.

## ORGANIZATION OF THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

The articles are divided into three sections: the context of the HUSK programs, analytic perspectives used to interpret the HUSK activities, and the applications and implications of the HUSK experiences. The Context section features the lead article by Johannessen and Eide that describes the selection of 10 case exemplars of the HUSK program drawn from throughout Norway. This article serves as the focal point for all the articles in this volume. As noted, it was extremely difficult to select a representative sample of cases, often provoking questions about those that failed to materialize and what else could be learned from those experiences.

The lead article is followed by a focus on the policy and organizational context of the HUSK program by Alm Andreassen and the profound impact of government reorganization on the exploratory bottom-up set of experiments unfolding in local municipalities. It captures the dynamics of organizational change at the top and at the bottom and the resulting tensions that emerge when different levels of government seek to innovate at the same time. Completing the section on context is the description of different ways of capturing the voices of service users who are traditionally outsiders when it comes to understanding and navigating organizational change. The process of storytelling captures some of this experience as documented by Natland and Celik.

The Analytic section begins with a discussion by Carnochan and Austin of the bureaucratic encounter and how it was modified by the various HUSK experiences. The

concepts of role transformation are used to explore the potential realignment of the service provider–user relationship. It is followed by a discussion of the role of dialogue in the HUSK projects by Natland. In this article, we see the complex interaction between language and identity when participants with different backgrounds and areas of expertise seek to collaborate by finding a language of caring and support. Given the focus on rebalancing the power relationship between service users and providers, Eide focuses her analysis on the philosophical aspects of pursuing equality. This is a phenomenally complex issue given the multiple definitions of equality and the shared recognition that the roles and responsibilities of service providers and users are rarely the same. The fourth article in this section by Julkunen features the role of practice research and how it represents a process of shared knowledge development over time. Given the emergence of practice research located in the junction of agency-based practice and the traditional conventions of research, HUSK projects provide an unusual illustration of the complexity of studying processes that are in perpetual motion, sometimes resulting in blurry and inconclusive pictures. This analytic section concludes with Foot’s overview and application of cultural historical activity theory to the HUSK experience. For decades, we have been searching for a practical theoretical framework with which to understand and research the essential elements of practice. Cultural historical activity theory represents considerable promise as our search continues.

The final section on Applications and Implications features Angelin’s comparative analysis of the HUSK experience with the involvement of service users in a university social work course. Building the service user perspective into the teaching of future social work practitioners is both complex and demanding. And yet how else can students and service users find common ground without an intense and sustained shared learning experience? And finally, McBeath serves as a discussant by drawing upon all the articles in order to identify major themes from the perspective of sense making. This provocative concluding article challenges all of us to continue the search for new and better ways to understand our respective roles and responsibilities for improving the quality of social services, the way we prepare future practitioners, and the way in which we conduct practice-based research.

As the Guest Editors, we want to thank our colleagues for their contribution to the description and analysis of the pioneering HUSK projects that sought to find ways to improve public social services. We also want to acknowledge the financial support of our efforts from the Mack Center on Nonprofit and Public Sector Management in the Human Services at the University of California, Berkeley, School of Social Welfare and the Social Work Program at Oslo and Akershus University College, Oslo, Norway. Our goal in this issue is to increase our collective understanding of the processes that promote learning rather than focus on the metrics of outcome evaluation, given that the national government engaged in the unusual process of empowering local communities to design and implement their own research and demonstration programs with no nationally defined outcome goals or measurement processes. We hope that this volume will generate discussion in social work communities around the world.

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