

**Organizational Supports for Practice Research:  
Illustrations from an International Practice Research Collaborative**

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### **Abstract**

Organizational support represents a critical driver of practice research projects. This analysis includes four international examples of such support (Norway, Finland, Belgium, and USA and China). The four studies capture the similarities and differences between university support and national government support. The analysis is placed within the context of defining practice research and the core components of organizational support. The findings emerged from presentations in a Practice Research Collaborative sponsored by the International Community on Practice Research in Social Work. The conclusion includes a discussion of a cross-case analysis along with the identification of implications for practice research studies in social work and affiliated professional disciplines.

**Key Words:** organizational support, practice research, cross-case analysis, international comparisons

## Organizational Supports for Practice Research: Illustrations from an International Practice Research Collaborative

Organizational supports have emerged as critical elements in the ongoing advancement of practice research in both organizational and community-based social work practice settings. The key supports include research funding, leadership, and values when it comes to linking practitioners, researchers and service users in the negotiated process of knowledge development. This analysis begins with a brief explanation in response to two major questions: 1) What do we mean by practice research?; and 2) What do we mean by organizational supports for practice research? The primary focus of this analysis includes illustrations of organizational supports for social work practice research that are drawn from several international perspectives, and that elaborate upon the second question. The analysis concludes with a set of cross-case reflections that support the identification of implications for the enhancement of organizational supports for practice research.

### **An Evolving Definition of Practice Research**

Since 2008 at the first International Conference on Practice Research, the definition of practice research has been evolving and increasingly elucidated with each succeeding conference located around the world. Its basic components are built upon the foundation of creating a knowledge development process that focuses primarily on the roles of the service provider, service user, and service researcher who all participate in defining the research questions and interpreting the research findings (Fisher, Austin, Julkunen, Sim, Uggerhøj, & Isokuortti, 2016). Practice research is often agency-based, service-focused, client-focused, and highly interactive

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(multiple stakeholders). Increasingly it is theory-informed and designed for dissemination and utilization in ways that inform practice, policy, and future research.

One of the unique features of practice research is that it takes into account the power dynamics between service users and service providers with respect to inclusiveness, transparency, ethical reflexivity, and critical reflection. This dimension represents a continuing challenge for all participants when seeking the active involvement of very busy and often overloaded service providers as well as overcoming the various barriers confronting service users who are struggling to cope with highly complex and challenging conditions. Another unique feature relates to the elements of co-learning, respect, and curiosity that are needed to support a dialogical process of inclusive inquiry and shared knowledge development.

The tools of practice research involve flexible and collaborative structures in the form of a negotiated process between practice (providers and users) and research (researchers and educators) to address the gap between research and practice. A preliminary set of principles has begun to guide the implementation of practice research in the form of: 1) knowing what to do, 2) knowing how to do it, 3) knowing where to anticipate and manage change, and 4) knowing how to share research (Austin & Carnochan, 2020).

And finally, one of the challenges facing practice research is that it is often funder-influenced, outcome-focused, and change-oriented. With regard to funder-influenced practice research, the findings noted later in this analysis refer to research funding secured by university faculty (or agency-based practice researchers) or secured from large government funded research sources. Irrespective of the funding sources, there is continuing pressure to identify the outcomes of practice research that can inform or change practice as well as public policies. The knowledge development mission of practice research operates on the basis of multiple values related to

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participation and amplifying the voices of service users. One of the major values is the promotion of multilevel change in a way that improves service delivery and enhances the lives of service users. All of these elements of practice research call for increased attention to the breadth and depth of organizational research.

### **Conceptualizing Organizational Supports for Practice Research**

In addition to acquiring an understanding of the evolving definition of practice research, it is also important to address the process of securing organizational supports for practice research. It could be argued that the ultimate goal of organizational supports for practice research is the development of evidence-informed practitioners and the amplification of the voices of service users with respect to the expertise of their experiences. The activities of these two groups of partners are somewhat different. The important activities of an evidence-informed practitioner include: the search for promising practices to address practice dilemmas (showcasing one's curiosity), integrating critical reflection into one's daily practice, and regularly engaging in critical thinking about the available knowledge and research related to one's practice (Austin, Dal Santo & Lee, 2012). In contrast, the activities of service users in practice research include the central role of group-based dialogical communications, involving assisting those with power to engage in power-sharing by flattening the hierarchy of power, articulating the expertise of experience, and sharing the core philosophy of "nothing about us without us" (Natland, 2015).

For diverse groups of practice researchers, the need for organizational supports for practice research can take many forms. The most obvious need involves the need for funding to support practice research along with the time available for practice research partners to contribute to the development and implementation of research. Even with the commitment of time and money,

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organizations interested in promoting practice research need to operationalize such a commitment both formally and informally.

In this connection, one of the key elements of organizational support is in the concept of a learning organization (Basten & Haamann, 2018; Garvin, Edmondson, & Gino, 2008). Often requiring support from senior management, human service learning organizations need to reflect the following characteristics: 1) systematic ongoing gathering of information to promote evidence-informed decision-making and problem-solving, 2) ongoing experimentation in search of new ways to provide services or structure the organization, 3) ongoing efforts to learn from the past by consulting with long-term staff and valuing institutional memory, 4) searching out and learning from promising and best practices found in other organizations, and 5) creating the necessary organizational structures to transfer and share knowledge internally and externally with a community of practice (Austin & Hopkins, 2004). Some of the elements of knowledge sharing are the use of tacit and explicit knowledge; namely, the tacit knowledge stored in the minds of practitioners (often called practice wisdom) and service users (often called the expertise of experience) and the explicit knowledge reflected in practice research.

Formal organizational supports can be found in current administrative policies and procedures that call for promoting respect and trust needed to support collaborative relationships among practice research partners. These procedures reflect the importance of transparent information-sharing and consistent communication. They also include engagement in reciprocal risk-taking while respecting the negotiated boundaries of various practice research partners. The reciprocal and often informal nature of partnership also includes the organizational support for continuous boundary spanning within the organization and between practice research partners.

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Other needed organizational supports include those related to monitoring the evolving organizational and community contexts, revisiting shared goals in light of changes, and managing the practice research project expectations in response to the evolving needs of the research partners. Some key elements of needed organizational supports for relational work include:

- methods for addressing communication-based coordination challenges (involving time, trust, and expertise), especially when practice and research partners face already-demanding work schedules.
- capacity to manage the evolving roles of both practice and research within the context of practice research.
- capacity to manage the differing time-based expectations for generating research results that are fast by university standards and slow by agency standards.
- ability to convert research implications into practical recommendations for organizational change that accounts for the unique aspects of organizational cultures
- capacity to maintain the flexibility of research partners given their different role-based expectations of organizational priorities (McBeath, Austin, Carnochan, & Chuang, 2021, p. 15).

And finally, some of the newer forms of organizational support for practice research include the following: 1) the expanding of the role of top management in support of practice research, 2) the use of link officers insider or outside social service organizations for research dissemination and utilization, 3) the establishment of an internal agency evidence request service, 4) the creation of agency-based research and development units, 5) the expanding role of service standards and accreditation, and 6) the sharing/learning with other organizations (Austin, Dal Santo & Lee, 2012; Graaf, McBeath, Lwin, Holmes & Austin, 2017).

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Based on the preceding overview of the evolving definition of practice research and the centrality of organizational supports, we now present findings in the form of contemporary case studies that represent examples of organizational supports from around the world. The following cases feature a study of social service leadership in a rapidly developing country, a well-funded demonstration project featuring the role of service users, and the development of a faculty-oriented research center focused on practice research. Each case identifies specific organizational supports needed to start and sustain a practice research effort.

### **Case Examples of Organizational Supports for Practice Research**

#### **Study 1: Opportunities and Challenges in Studying Organizational Supports for Practice Research in Beijing, China during COVID-19**

This illustration summarizes the development and implementation of a study of the experiences of executive leaders of Chinese nonprofit social service organizations during COVID-19. The study took the form of a Fall 2020 survey identifying needed organizational supports in the delivery of social work services and other community-based services in Beijing from March to September 2020.

In China, social work service delivery generally occurs through purchase of service contracts that denote the social services that government-authorized nonprofit organizations are expected to deliver (e.g., mental health care, educational support, employment assistance) to low-income individuals, families, and related groups (Kwan Chan & Lei, 2017). The nonprofit delivery of social services is a major feature of the rapid and uneven growth of the Chinese social welfare state, particularly as major regions have invested public funding in order to reduce city-rural differences in social services (Mok, Chan, & Wen, 2020).



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The study of organizational supports reflected three motivations of local social service leaders that inform the changing context of social work practice in China. First, leaders identified the need to address burnout concerns among frontline social workers and provide opportunities for the training and supervision of social workers (Wang et al., 2020). Second, leaders acknowledged the search for ways of delivering social work services while addressing the changing performance expectations of public administrators (Xu, 2020). Third, leaders recognized the need for nonprofit social service organizations to coordinate and collaborate in delivering social work services in response to different and changing community needs, while adapting to contractual requirements and public policies (Zhang & Guo, 2021).

These identified needs highlight the important role of local leadership in supporting social service capacity building. They also reflect the necessity of nonprofit leaders innovating and collaborating in shaping frontline social work practice and practice research, as nonprofit organizations face significant operational challenges in delivering services while coordinating with other providers during COVID-19 (Kim & Mason, 2020; Neely-Barnes et al., 2021).

## **The Current Project**

In order to reflect the perspectives of leaders in different types of social service organizations during COVID-19, an online survey was used. To ensure that survey questions would be relevant to nonprofit leaders, the survey instrument was pilot tested in Summer 2020 with an expert panel comprised of 10 Beijing-based nonprofit administrators from social service organizations not identified for survey participation. The survey was refined based upon their feedback.

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The survey was then distributed in Fall 2020 to executive directors of nonprofit social service organizations that (1) were formally registered with the Beijing Civil Affairs Bureau in 2020, and (2) held current contracts for social work service delivery. In total, 65 of 73 executive directors completed the cross-sectional survey over late August to early September 2020. The survey was primarily quantitative, and addressed questions of organizational maintenance and adaptation, social work service coordination and collaboration, and contract-based service needs.

Basic organizational questions concerned the types of social services being delivered by contract, the geographic locations of services, the length of time that the agency had provided social services, the number and types of frontline and management staff, and the types and amounts of revenue received by the agency. Other questions concerned the demographics and educational and work experiences of organizational leaders. These questions reflected the basic organizational context of social work practice.

In addition, survey topics concerned the perceptions of organizational leaders regarding:

- The social work services that had been started, adjusted, and stopped during the first 6 months of COVID-19;
- The time needed to coordinate service delivery, challenges in coordinating services, and efforts to enhance service responsiveness over this time;
- Service and operational impacts due to COVID-19; and
- Ongoing leadership needs for training and technical assistance related to program development, staff development, financial management, and social work capacity building.

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A major aim of the survey was the assessment of how leaders of nonprofit social service organizations address issues of COVID-19 internally and externally. Internal to their organization, leaders were asked how often they develop or adjust social work service projects and positions, provide supervisory support and staff training, and engage in financial management. Externally, leaders were asked how frequently they coordinate social work services with other social organizations, offer suggestions to local departments on epidemic prevention and control, and use social media to promote and share knowledge on social work services with other community groups. Leaders were also asked how challenging such internal and external service efforts are.

## **Evolution of the Project**

Our practice research collaboration started in Beijing in Summer 2018, when we began to explore collaborative practice research opportunities focused upon the environment of social work practice. As we developed papers on adjacent topics, we searched for a project that identifies the opportunities and challenges facing social work practitioners, and practice research projects, at different levels of analysis. In partnership with local nonprofit leaders, we proposed the design of an exploratory survey of the interorganizational and intraorganizational context of social work practice, followed by the identification of specific opportunities for nonprofit social service organizations to engage in practice research. This two-phase approach was intended to assist organizational leaders in supporting practice research at the interorganizational, administrative, and frontline levels.

In Fall 2019, one of us (McBeath) was on sabbatical and planned to spend much of the 2019-2020 academic year in Beijing. We started to develop the survey on needed organizational supports for practice research. However, the pandemic required us to

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modify our plans, as we transitioned from in-person collaboration in China to virtual collaboration across continents. The result is the online survey of needed organizational supports for social work service delivery and practice improvement.

Currently, analysis of the survey data is proceeding. We have received fellowship funding from an institute that promotes international scholarly exchange in order to make further progress on manuscripts that reflect the survey research topics.

### **Implications for the Development of Practice Research Studies on Organizational Supports**

We now share four implications for scholars who seek to develop collaborations focused upon organizational supports for practice research. These include: the exploration of shared interests and the importance of providing essential investments in building a collaborative research project; the search for collaborative opportunities amidst the challenging and uncertain environment; the importance of regular communication in supporting an evolving research collaboration; and the core values of resilience and patience, as the research collaborators adapt to changing organizational and policy contexts. These implications reflect the challenges involved in developing and implementing an international practice research collaboration during COVID-19. However, the implications may also relate to strategies for scholars seeking to develop local practice research studies.

First, we note the importance of exploration among scholars seeking to study organizational supports for practice research. Such exploration involves identifying shared interests that concern substantive issues of practice, the place of theory, and preferred methods for carrying out practice research studies. It also requires investments of practice knowledge and research knowledge in order to identify common interests and complementary expertise. The goal is to identify a collaboration that each scholar views as relevant, practical, researchable, and useful for practitioners and researchers.

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Second, we acknowledge the importance of identifying opportunities for collaboration while we recognize the challenge in seeking certainty in an uncertain environment of COVID-19. It is important for practice researchers invested in social service organizations to identify points of reassurance. For practice researchers, reassurance can come from exploring, finding, recording, and explaining. In addition, for researchers of social service organizations, reassurance can come from searching for opportunities to document service innovations and organizational improvements. These processes provide a strong basis for collaboration.

Third, we underscore the value of consistent communication in fostering an ongoing practice research collaboration. At a basic level, regular dialogue is needed concerning continuing practice needs and new threats to practice, organizational supports that are available and those that are needed, and methods for carrying out a planned practice research study. Such communication should address the question of how to modify the collaborative research study in response to the needs of local leaders. It should also support continued exploration of basic questions of scholarship and research, practice, and the particulars of the collaboration.

Fourth, we highlight the importance of resilience and patience in adapting a practice research project in challenging circumstances. These qualities may be important as practice researchers and social service organizations seek to adapt to the social context of COVID-19. It should be noted that the pace and nature of change may be advantageous or disadvantageous, depending upon the specific environmental opportunities and challenges. If practice researchers and scholars of social service organizations can be attentive to planned and unplanned changes, then opportunities may arise to adapt more actively to the change.

## **Future Directions for Practice Researchers**

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Finally, we offer concluding reflections that identify strategies for responding to common challenges facing practice researchers. For organizationally-focused practice researchers, the challenge of insufficient time and limited funding must be faced. Addressing this challenge can entail the development of small-scale projects such as brief needs assessments in a single organizational unit or team (e.g., scans of organizational barriers to service uptake by service users). Such projects can set the stage for more ambitious proposals that seek to systematically identify and address the need for specific organizational supports.

Another basic challenge involves maintaining motivation among collaborating researchers and practitioners amidst the complexity of practice research. Some strategies to stay focused include: returning to shared and core practice values; keeping regular communication; searching for novel ways to support organizational improvement; and reminding oneself and one's agency partner how and why the specific practice research project is important and interesting.

A more fundamental challenge involves partners who bring different cultural backgrounds, experiences, and preferences to a collaborative practice research project. These differences are complementary, not contradictory. It is important to take time to discuss these differences at the beginning of any practice research project, and periodically thereafter. The task is therefore to appreciate and learn about one another while understanding the complexity of organizational life in diverse practice environments.

In our particular case, we have had to adapt to ever-changing situations in our universities and countries during a pandemic with unanticipated impacts on local practices, organizations, policies, and research partnerships. We therefore recognize the value of slow scholarship as we explore ways for social service leaders to identify innovative and collaborative ways to improve social work service delivery during COVID-19 (Hartman & Darab, 2012).

**Study 2: Organizational Support for the Dissemination and Utilization of Research among Social Workers**

Sharing research findings is important for improving services and it may also lead for developing new research questions.

However, practitioners may lack time or competence to apply research. Social work professionals can benefit from practical guidance on how to integrate research into their practice and decision-making. This case example of a practice research project (called Practice and Theory) features a group intervention model based on organizational support (Kääriäinen & Muurinen, 2019).

The goal of the Practice and Theory project was to share primarily qualitative and theoretical knowledge with groups of practitioners using the pioneering theories of multidisciplinary pragmatist inquiry (Dewey, 1920/1988; Addams, 1910/2019). Each Practice and Theory project includes five to six meetings. The central feature of each session involves the selection of a one-page summary of research studies and relevant theories (prepared by the group facilitator) based upon the group's assessment of their relevance for supporting current decision-making related to various client situations. After each session, the participants think about the application of the chosen piece of research to their practice for two weeks in order to share their observations at the next group meeting. The group process is described in more detail in an online Guidebook and the table of contents is presented in Figure 1 (see Kääriäinen & Muurinen, 2019, <https://urly.fi/2Fh7>).

[insert Figure 1 here]

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The prepared research summaries were based on qualitative research and theories presented in social work literature. An example of a theory-based summary on Actor-Network Theory (ANT) introducing a few of the key concepts is presented in Figure 2. ANT was selected to open discussion on the role that non-human actors (e.g., physical objects, technology, or policies) play in practice. Humans and non-human actors play roles in a “translation process”, for example when implementing or innovating a new social work intervention.

[insert Figure 2 here]

An example of a prepared summary is a qualitative study in Finland (Juvonen, 2014) based on eleven recorded conversations between young clients (age 18-26) and outreach workers as well as 10 recordings of meetings also involving other HSO professionals (e.g. unemployment offices, adult social services, housing offices). The government-funded outreach work is carried out in public places and homes to reach young people who were, for example, homeless, unemployed, not in training or have substance-abuse problems. The aim of the outreach work was to build trust, motivate change, reduce harm and to connect clients with local social service agencies. The research questions related to the ways that societal expectations of the behaviours of young people (unemployed, homeless, substance abuser) are communicated and enforced. In the study, the cultural expectations relate to independent living, working, studying, or attending rehabilitation as part of the activation policy.

In the case of the Juvonen study, the group discussion focused on the main findings in the form of three discourses to express expectations towards the young clients and their choices in life. The content of the discourses included: 1) setting boundaries and restricting the choices related to access to services or setting sanctions on benefits, 2) appealing to the sense of duty and moral



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understanding to educate the young client about the expectations of employers and 3) providing new insights into the obligations and reasons behind the agency-related expectations, such as attending work, education or rehabilitation for receiving social benefits.

Agency means that people are “agents” or “actors” in the social world and capable of making choices, changing their living conditions and responding to or even opposing social constraints.

While the professionals sometimes used supportive expressions like “would you consider”, eventually more directive expressions were used to remind clients of societal expectations using the words “you have to” or “you must”. With regard to practice implications, the study noted that the way in which cultural and service-related expectations are expressed or explained can limit the young people’s choices and reflect another form of social exclusion. Especially for clients in vulnerable situations, professionals need to balance the obligations or requirements of their service organizations with the provision of sufficient client support.

### **Pilot Project Implementation and Evaluation**

An evaluation of the Practice and Theory pilot project (2015-2017) included qualitative interview data from three groups of 4-6 participants that comprised a total of 16 participants, along with post-project follow-up interviews (three to six months later) comprised of 14 participants reported in previous research articles (Muurinen & Kääriäinen, 2020; 2022). All the participants were MSW-level social workers who had training in clinical adult social work or child protection services.

While the primary focus of the project represented a process of developing and analysing a form of organizational support for research dissemination, the implementation of the project also included external researcher support. The project was based upon the previous experiences of both researchers at the Heikki Waris Institute, which is a joint research and development unit serving the

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municipalities in the Helsinki metropolitan regions that is affiliated with the Social Work program at the University of Helsinki. The Institute featured practice research by combining research, service development, and social work education, in which pragmatism had been a central philosophical foundation for the conducting of practice research (Muurinen & Satka, 2020).

The implementation of the Practice and Theory project represents a research-practice partnership where one researcher held a team manager position in one of the service delivery organizations while the other researcher was located in a university. The team manager helped with gaining permissions, advertising the group, recruiting participants, and booking meeting rooms. The university researcher (with prior external supervision experience and training) provided the group with an outsider's perspective. Both researchers facilitated the group and prepared the one-page theory and research summaries for discussion and application. The organizational support for the pilot project included formal permissions to carry out the research, to allocate time for it and small research funding.

In regards to the results of the project, the group experience provided the participants with new insights and understanding about how research knowledge could be connected to practice. For example, one participant noted that "*I could reflect in a completely new way as to what it means to do social work or what might be some effects of decisions made or actions taken*". Understanding how theories can inform practice was experienced as professionally empowering given how poorly equipped some participants were when it came to using theory or research to inform their practice.

In the Practice and Theory group, the theories and research helped the participants to acquire another perspective of their work, by reflecting upon and explaining their own reasoning or actions in search of new ways to practice. As the social workers became

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more aware of their own perspectives and argumentation in decision-making, this empowering experience led to a new appreciation of their skills and their work-related sense of competence. By reflecting on practice situations, applying scientific knowledge, observing the consequences, and making interpretations, participants strengthened their roles and self-concept as research-minded practitioners.

While the research dissemination meetings could easily be incorporated into busy practitioner schedules, considerable time was required by the facilitators to plan group sessions, compile literature reviews, prepare the abstracts, and facilitate the meetings. The structure of this pilot project could also be adapted and included into social work practice training or the design of research projects led by university-based or consortium-based researchers. The shared discussions could provide a collaborative way to systemically disseminate the results and promote evidence-informed practice.

In addition, the shared discussions can also become part of a planning project that leads to new practice research projects. Based on the experiences of the previous groups, the discussions of existing research and theories can generate abductive reasoning (making a probable conclusion about practice based upon what one knows), interesting preliminary research, as well as practice hypotheses. For example, a social worker was inspired by discussions in the Practice and Theory meetings and encouraged to lead an organizational development project that involved writing a manual on ethical decision-making in child protection.

In conclusion and as demonstrated by the Practice and Theory pilot project, reflective discussions within service delivery organizations can provide a new source of organizational support for conducting practice research as well as identify implications for improving practice. In supporting an expanded definition of evidence-informed practice, it is important to note that theories, perspectives, frameworks, and conceptualizations can provide practitioners with concrete tools for decision-making. Shared reflections

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within specially designed learning communities can provide a new way of strengthening evidence-informed and theory-informed practice.

### **Study 3: Identifying the Practice Research Issues Involved in the Norwegian HUSK Project**

In Norway, as in other Western countries, the social welfare system has become increasingly entangled in political pressure to reform the system and increase the quality of public social services. One of several government initiated programmes to achieve these goals was the HUSK program, which is the Norwegian abbreviation for “The University Research Program to Support Selected Municipal Social Service Offices”. HUSK was launched by the Directorate of Health and Social Care and was linked to the National Strategy for Quality Improvement of Health and Social Services. The directorate claimed there was too big of a gap between education, research, and practice. In order to address such practice issues, the HUSK programme called for research and development projects aimed at achieving three strategic goals: 1) promoting structures and opportunities for equal cooperation between municipal social service providers/social workers, social service users, social work researchers, and educators, 2) strengthening practice-based social research, and 3) expanding knowledge designed to inform practice (Austin & Johannessen, 2015; Johannessen & Eide, 2015).

### **Organizational Supports Needed to Carry Out the HUSK Research**

The programme provided funding (8,97 million euro or \$10 million) for six years (2006-2011). Four universities in different regions of Norway were selected to lead the HUSK projects regionally. The decentralized structure of the research provided each region as well as local agencies with considerable flexibility. Each regional HUSK program included 10-15 local projects resulting in a total of approximately 50 local projects. They varied in scope and duration. The major topics included user involvement, equality,

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dialogical perspectives, minority perspectives in social work, critical reflection, and even the design and implementation of an agency-based education program (University Clinic in Social Work) based on collaboration between faculty members, practitioners, service users and students (Johannessen & Eide 2015).

However, the unique aspects of HUSK projects were the requirement for the equal collaboration of service users in the design and delivery of the research and development projects. The participating users were social service recipients from local municipalities, and some were from user organizations. The HUSK programme provided a research context in which new forms of research could be explored and in which traditional roles and power relations between the participants were challenged, thereby involving service users as equal partners and co-researchers. While HUSK contributed to strengthening the value of service users' experiences, concrete results in the form of new models in practice were not adequately disseminated or utilized in social service programs (Gjernes & Bliksvaer 2011).

### **An Illustrative HUSK Finding**

One example of how organizational issues might impact the development of a local practice research project can be seen in the study of Natland and Hansen (2016) where they analyzed the partnership process in one particular project. The project in this municipality started with a meeting between representatives from the regional steering group, the regional university representatives, and the social services to discuss participation in the HUSK program. The municipality wanted the HUSK project to be based on needs in the practice field. One particular need was to evaluate a local project started by the municipality's social services, that offered

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psychological assessment for long term users in regard to health, qualifications and ability to work. The managers had already developed project applications, hoping that HUSK funding would help realize them. The conclusion of the meeting was to proceed with the “psychological assessment project”. It was also decided to assign leadership to the local social service who also had developed the agency’s original application followed by the recruitment of local service users.

While this illustration captures the excitement and promise of future collaboration, the role of leadership and the perceptions of service users about not being involved in the budgeting and priority-setting processes led to many conflicts and ultimately the termination of the group. For example, group leaders had ongoing discussions about the relevance of the “psychological assessment project” within the HUSK context as it involved only one of the partners and took a considerable part of the budget. A major challenge at the start was to understand the implications of a HUSK project. The partners had little experience with collaborative processes (Natland & Hansen 2016).

Some of the specific obstacles related to organizational support for practice research included the following: 1) the early anchoring of the project in social service organization may have contributed to the perception that *practitioners were the primary actors*; 2) the *decision on projects made without involving all stakeholders* generated different opinions regarding the status of various activities; 3) while the flexible leadership framework provided by the government funding was unique and formed the basis for creativity and innovative thinking, it also led to *undefined expectations* regarding activities and outcomes; and 4) the assignment of leadership to a solitary practitioner instead of considering a shared leadership model comprised of both practitioners and service users.

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As part of the service user empowerment process that developed during the project period, innovative user-led seminars were designed and implemented to foster collaboration among stakeholders participating in HUSK projects (Natland 2015). These seminars enabled the representatives of service users to raise their voices in various HUSK projects. In this particular case, the service user representatives raised questions about the municipality's annual use of a questionnaire to assess the satisfaction of service users with current services. The service user representatives recommended an alternative approach based upon the co-learning method of *dialogue seminars* where all participants engage equally in the process of defining current situation, challenges, and future solutions. It is designed to foster collaboration between service users and service providers.

The goal of this dialogue methodology was to develop *bottom-up evaluations* of the local services, but disagreement soon arose concerning what kind of information the evaluation should focus on. The users wanted a radically new approach with open-ended questions that focused on the future rather than just the past. The practitioners expressed doubt that this approach would provide valuable information to improve services, but the recommendation of the service users was finally accepted. The group arranged for three dialogue seminars that included users and practitioners where they developed several ideas to improve social services. The dialogue seminars aroused the interest of county municipality leaders who saw the potential to use dialogue seminars in the evaluation of other services (Natland & Hansen 2016).

The experiences from the negotiations between users and practitioners about the suitability of dialogue seminars and their use elsewhere illustrate some of the major issues regarding the impact of organizational support of practice research; namely, 1) the *epistemological clash* between practitioners and service users regarding research methods that generate “scientifically valued

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evidence” (qualitative dialogue seminars with open-ended questions or quantitatively-oriented questionnaires); 2) the tension surrounding *professional roles and power* and; 3) challenges with *time-limited* project implementation (Natland 2020).

### **Implications for the Organizational Supports Needed for Conducting Practice Research**

The HUSK experiences provide both structural-organizational and personal-societal aspects of an organizationally supportive context. The local social services practitioners were interested in participating but the general evaluation of the HUSK projects found that they were unsure about of *their role* in the conduct of practice research. In addition, *work-related obstacles and time pressures* became evident. Lack of support from the top management makes it difficult for practitioners to devote time and energy for practice research when practitioners are expected to become part of a learning community. Experiences from HUSK show that when practitioners are included, they become more interested in research and see themselves as important stakeholders in producing knowledge with direct relevance for their own practice. This is why it is important to support the development and funding of a supportive infrastructure so that managers can help to close the gaps between research and practice. Another challenge relates to *time-limited research funding*. When the money runs out and the project period is coming to an end, many promising activities and new models were terminated and not followed up or further developed. Practice research project planning needs to take into account the importance of disseminating and utilizing project findings within the ongoing operations of social service organizations. Organizational support for practice research also needs to consider the issue of project participant fatigue.

Closely related to structural-organizational support is *the personal, professional and societal aspects of practice research*.

Important findings from the HUSK project call for attention to not only organizational and work-related obstacles, but also the



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preparation and engagement of research-minded professionals (especially during their pre-service education) who have some basic knowledge of different qualitative and quantitative research methods. Even with this knowledge, the practitioners sought to overrule the service users support for the qualitative dialogue seminars that were viewed by the practitioners as “not proper research”.

It is also important to continuously focus on research goals and outcomes to make sure that the voices of all participants are heard, especially in relationship to concrete project outcomes. Underlying the goal of maximizing the voices of all participants are the norms and values that enable a group to manage shared activities as well as develop some sort of collective identity. A decisive part of this is to understand and manage conflicts inherent in processes where power and resources need to be shared in new ways (Natland 2020).

In summary, these findings from the HUSK experience can inform future practice research by emphasizing the importance of organizational support for managing conflicts and different research mindsets as well as the importance of promoting research environments that build upon the recognition and trust needed by all participants.

### **Study 4: Academic Workplaces as a Form of Organizational Supports for Practice Research**

The installment of so-called *Academic Workplaces* or Academic Collaborative Centres (ACC) is part of a recent evolution in Flanders (the Dutch speaking part of Belgium) and in the Netherlands to create structures to support practice research. Between 2005 and 2014, the Dutch Ministry of Health allocated over thirty million dollars for the creation of eleven ACCs in order to “improve knowledge exchange between policy makers, researchers and practitioners (and) increase the production of socially relevant scientific

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knowledge and the utilization of such research evidence in policy and practice” (Hoeijmakers et al., 2013, p. 175). According to Steens, Van Regenmortel, and Hermans (2018), referring to Molleman and Fransen (2012), five key elements of these ACCs were identified:

- A contractual agreement for a long-term partnership between the university and a practice organization;
- Professionals working for both the university and the practice organization (so-called science practitioners);
- Involvement of experienced researchers and professors in the centre;
- The research is focused on questions relevant for practice; and
- The intention to develop a long-term partnership

Steens et al. (2018) noted that the development of these centres has expanded significantly in the Netherlands as well as in Flanders. In the Netherlands the focus expanded from public health to other disciplines including social work. An ACC for Child and Family Social Work was created in Flanders, inspired by social service developments in the Netherlands, to explore the possibilities of bridging the gap between research and practice. Steen et al. (2018) identified the goals of the ACC as both instrumental and cultural. The instrumental goal involves building knowledge about the enabling and restraining aspects of interventions, to contribute to the general knowledge base of social work, and to improve practice. The cultural goal is the formation of a learning organization, where critical questions can be raised, different perspectives on social reality are discussed, and collaboration between all the different stakeholders is focused on improving the quality of social work. As such, the notion of co-creation is at the heart of these ACCs.

By following examples elsewhere in the Netherlands, multiple academic workplaces were launched in Flanders. For instance, the Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy at Ghent University (Belgium) developed three types of academic workplaces. The

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first (which no longer exists) was an academic workplace on youth care, featuring regular informal meetings between practitioners and policy makers to discuss current developments and problems in youth care in the form of a learning network that also involved researchers. The international perspectives of researchers were combined with the practical day-to-day knowledge of practitioners.

A second academic workplace focused on the de-institutionalization of care, linked to Article 19 of the Convention of the Rights of People with Disabilities, featuring the equal right of all persons with disabilities to live in the community, with choices equal to others, and with effective and appropriate measures to facilitate full inclusion and participation in the community. In this academic workplace, a full-time Ph.D. researcher and half-time post-doc researcher are financed by the Ministry of Welfare for a four-year period. Similar to other academic workplaces, a steering committee governance structure was set up with practitioners, researchers, service users and policy makers.

A third academic workplace was established to feature the dynamics of a positive living climate in residential youth care stimulated by the interest of a practitioner-researcher working towards the Ph.D. As a result of this interest, the university and the youth care institution developed a project with some government funding for several years allocated for a part-time researcher (Levrouw et al., 2018; 2020) along with a steering committee of practitioners, researchers, user advocacy representatives and policy makers.

The focus of the third academic workplace was to strengthen the relationship between staff and children in residential care. A key problem in residential care is currently that managerial tendencies dominate, leading to a focus on control, which inhibits positive relations with youngsters but also can have an impact on professionals who feel their job is being reduced to formal rather than

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meaningful tasks. As such, there is a need for the development of responsiveness, giving space and autonomy, supporting relationships between children, creating family-like environments together with the child's family and important stakeholders, providing information, and being transparent regarding what is expected of the children (Van der Helm, 2011).

### **Elements of the Specific Practice Research Project**

The project that focused on staff and youth in residential care included the following workplace research questions: 1) How can we amplify and respond to the voices of professionals working in residential care?; and 2) What are the individual and systemic elements that support or inhibit the development of a positive living environment in residential care? Underlying these questions was the perception that the development of a positive living climate for residential youth needed to be combined with attention to the working climate of the residential care workers.

The research questions were explored using a diversity of research methods that included staff training days and intervention meetings designed to develop a common language for a positive living environment as well as the capacity to implement a systematic way of monitoring and improving the present climate in the residential care units. We used standardized surveys, developed by Van der Helm in the Netherlands, to capture the voices of both the children and the staff. In addition, the PDCA (Plan-Do-Check-Act) intervention cycle was introduced as a way to inform all the participants about the project.

This process included specifying objectives, data collection using standardized instruments, reporting findings, and offering possibilities for improvement. The specific follow-up steps included group discussions to monitor changes, and repeated

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administration of the standardized tests at six months. Finally, we used a six-month follow-up by administering standardized tests and discussed the findings and semi-structured interviews with the participants in order to evaluate the PDCA process.

The findings resulted in wide-ranging practice research recommendations, beginning with the importance of including siblings and parents who do not live in residential care. A second recommendation called for creating space in the residential care units for creating home-like activities (e.g., playing games, watching television). A third recommendation cautioned staff about overloading the residential environment with rules and expectations. A fourth recommendation stressed the importance of developing positive staff-child relationships, defined as staff being available to listen, do things together, provide opportunities to experiment, and involve children in daily decision-making. A fifth recommendation was to be aware of the stress level experienced by staff as it impacts the behaviors of children.

Insufficient attention to these recommendations can create obstacles to implementing home-like activities, such as when government funding and service regulations ignore this component. These regulations call for justifying actions and decisions required in youth care plans, adequate attention to the importance of staff time to invest in building responsive relationships with children needed to establish a positive living group environment, and responding to government regulatory calls for increased managerial and organizational duties in residential care.

In summary, it is interesting to note that the original five goals of academic workplaces can be interpreted rather loosely. Where the original country-wide focus was on the development of evidence-based knowledge and the methodological development of social work, other interpretations have emerged in the Flemish context. For example, the elements of the academic workplaces have

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become attractive to both policy makers and practitioners when combining research (academic) and practice (workplace), thereby becoming a powerful tool for gaining organizational support for practice research in different contexts.

In addition, the sustainability of this academic workplace model needs further attention. Evaluations show that not all criteria of an effective academic workplace are met, despite the fact that the model has strengthened the relationship between practitioners and knowledge institutes by creating research questions that are more relevant to practice. For instance, the funding for the Flanders academic workplace project on developing a positive living climate has been extended recently, while the goals have shifted towards more practitioner training rather than developing research on residential youth care. In essence, the creation of long-term funding contracts between the government and the research partners has proven to be vulnerable to the displacement of the original goals. Protecting practice research funding and time investments are proving to be a long-term challenge when it comes to providing organizational support for practice research.

## Discussion

As a result of the previous efforts to define the principles of practice research, explore the varieties of needed organizational supports for practice research, and provide brief examples of specific studies, it is now possible to reflect upon major themes emerging from the four illustrations that are highlighted in Figure 3.

[insert Figure 3 here]

## Cross-Case Reflections

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The first theme involves the sources that lead to the initiation of practice research. The cases distinguish between researcher-initiated and funder-initiated practice research. Practice research that is researcher-initiated represents the classic model of social science research where scholars perceive an opportunity to build knowledge based upon prior experience and a review of the literature. The projects in China and Finland reflect this model as they seek to engage the practice community with exploratory studies designed to either expand existing knowledge (China) or explore an intervention (Finland). In contrast, the funder-initiated research projects are illustrated by the government-funded demonstration projects in Norway (HUSK) and Belgium (Academic Collaborative Centres). Each of these latter examples provided substantial multi-site funding throughout their respective countries to explore new ways to improve social services with the active involvement of university social work education and research programs that attracted considerable faculty involvement.

When comparing the two sources of motivation to engage in practice research, it is clear that the researcher-initiated model relies on substantial faculty motivation to find the time and financial resources (often modest) to engage in exploratory research. In contrast, funder-initiated research is motivated by significant government interest in finding more effective and efficient ways to deliver social services and attracts researchers and social service agency partners who share this interest.

Irrespective of the origins of the motivation to engage in practice research, each of the case examples noted in the previous section share certain common characteristics; namely, initial goals, practice research questions, research methodologies, and findings or lessons learned. Each of these characteristics is explored below.

### *Initial Goals*

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A shared goal across the four examples involves some form of bridging the gap between research and practice. Each of the examples seeks to respond to changing times and conditions that impact efforts to improve social service practices. Each illustration involves the exchange of knowledge drawn from prior practice experience and research literature. Two of the examples (Norway and Belgium) rely upon the establishment of new organizational structures and substantial government financial support to promote exploratory research and demonstration projects.

### *Practice Research Questions*

While all four illustrations feature practice research questions needed to guide their inquiries, they also differ. Two of the case examples feature practitioners at the managerial and line staff levels (China and Finland) while the other two have a special focus on service users as well as service providers (Norway and Belgium). All of the illustrations pose questions that concern organizational supports in the form of needed training or professional development, either in terms of supervisory support or strengthening worker-client relations. Other cases raise organizational questions about increased service coordination (China) or multi-level staff cooperation (Norway and Belgium). Very few of the practice research questions buried in the four cases focus on implications or recommendations for government policy makers. This omission is a common dilemma in the arena of practice research.

### *Research Methods*

Significant divergence among the four cases can be found in the area of research methods. The more quantitative methods are demonstrated in the inter- and intra-organizational inquiry using survey methods with senior social service administrators in China. In contrast, there is more of a focus on intervention methods to promote social service improvement related to staff training in Belgium,



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clinical group discussions in Finland, and dialogue seminars in Norway related to service users, providers, and researchers. Only one case utilized standardized measurement tools as pre- and post-evaluation data for shared interpretation with staff.

### *Findings and Lessons Learned*

As would be expected, the largest divergence across the four cases is illustrated in the finding themes emerging from cross-case comparisons. Since the China project represents a work-in-progress (with major findings yet to be reported) that is significantly delayed by the global pandemic, one of the lessons learned relates to the necessity of “slow scholarship” inherent in international practice research collaboration. In a somewhat similar manner, the pilot intervention research in Finland awaits further replication given the small number of discussion group participants and the need for further elaboration of the complexities associated with the organizational support needed to create the one-page summaries used by the group facilitators. Replication also calls for more attention to outcomes over time related to the degree to which the group participants actually demonstrate the use of evidence-informed and theory-informed practice after the intervention concludes.

As noted in the description of HUSK in Norway, more attention needs to be given in major research and demonstration projects to the measurement of outcomes. While many innovative practice research projects were launched throughout the country, there was insufficient attention to creating the necessary organizational supports to assess outcomes as well as to utilize a dissemination and utilization mechanism (as funding was discontinued and momentum was lost). The practice research projects in Belgium appear to reflect challenges that are similar to HUSK. The research projects supported by the multiple Academic Collaborative Centres tend to be short-term, with less attention to replication inside or outside the country. Similarly, there is less

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attention given to changing government policies even when the problems are clearly delineated in the research study (e.g., lack of contractual policies supporting home-like activities, over-emphasis on documenting youth care plans, and over-emphasis on the managerial and organizational duties required of staff at the expense of the time needed to build responsive relationships with the children).

### **Implications for Organizational Supports for Practice Research**

Based on the cross-case analysis, a range of research questions emerges for further consideration. These questions can be organized into at least three categories that reflect the initiation, implementation, and sustainment of any practice research collaborative. These questions correspond with the beginning, middle, and ending or continuing elements of practice research, as noted earlier.

First, is there value in identifying common practice research questions across countries that operate social services under very different conditions? If so, then some possible questions arise that concern the organizational supports needed to initiate practice research studies. These include:

1. What new organizational supports are needed to frame studies involving diverse service users, managers, and staff in response to evolving funder and policy needs and calls for social justice?
2. What supports are needed to move beyond the initial methodological formulation of a practice research study in order to theorize about the meaning and future uses of practice research findings?
3. What organizational supports are needed for researchers to collaborate with human service organizations that reflect

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different developmental needs or different stages of readiness for collaboration?

4. What university supports are needed for researchers to successfully negotiate their roles and responsibilities while attending to the different expectations associated with academic norms?

Second, what are some of the practical considerations needed to successfully implement practice research processes? Related questions include:

5. What organizational supports are needed for researchers and practitioners to co-develop research questions?

6. How can new and continuing organizational challenges, especially related to changes in service delivery, be managed in order to provide organizational support for practice research?

7. What supports are needed for researchers to share study findings in ways that are useful to different groups of stakeholders (i.e., service users, workers, managers, organizations) and academic scholars?

Finally, what are the key factors needed to sustain practice research over time and in different scales, including beyond a specific geographic, policy, or funding context? For example,

8. What organizational supports among university and agency partners are needed to engage in cross-cultural communications given the different cultures of academic research and agency-based practice?

9. How can academic and agency-based leaders use their practice research efforts to support interorganizational knowledge sharing through communities of learning?

10. What organizational supports are needed to promote cross-pollination and collaboration in the form of Practice Research

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### Collaboratives?

In conclusion, this analysis presented basic elements of practice research that reflect key processes for the design, development, and sustainment of practice research studies. We also identified key organizational supports needed to engage in practice research, including sufficient funding, time, and shared leadership and commitment. These needed resources help practice researchers and their agency-based partners engage in collaborative problem-solving. Our reflections upon the four specific studies identified the importance of distinguishing between investigator-initiated vs. funder-initiated practice research studies. We also noted that practice research studies focused upon the issue of organizational supports can vary, ranging from more qualitative studies that seek to find systematic ways to improve worker-service user interactions to more quantitative studies that seek to examine the architecture of interorganizational service coordination across a specific human service delivery system.

In addition, given the rapid pace of change in social service agencies, it can be difficult to create a research culture that values practice research studies that “build upon one another”. However, multi-phased studies carried out over several months or years can provide a much richer foundation for knowledge development to inform practice, add significantly to the literature for other researchers to build upon, and contribute to the development of practice or interventive theory.

For researchers, undertaking future studies of organizational supports for practice research may require multiple types of knowledge. The first is local knowledge of different social work practice challenges from the perspective of agency staff and service users. The second is organizational knowledge of the specific needs of the social service agency in relation to its fiscal and policy context. A third type of knowledge involves knowing how to carry out practical and relevant practice research studies, while

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acknowledging the expectations and requirements of agency and community leaders and university officials. The 10 questions we have offered may help researchers to improve the understanding and quality of future practice research studies.

It should be noted that the study of organizational supports for practice research is relatively new in the practice research literature. However, the study of organizational research in social work practice is longstanding. Thus, practice research studies of organizational capacity for social service improvement can draw upon these newer and older bodies of literature. We anticipate that such future studies will contribute to improved understandings of needed organizational supports in diverse community agency settings and different international contexts.

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Figure 1. Table of Contents from the Online Guide

**Table of Contents**

- The Basis for the Group
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  - Observation Form
    - Experimental Act
    - Consequence for Yourself
    - Consequence for the Client
  - Brochure for the Practice and Theory Group

(Kääriäinen & Muurinen 2019).

**Figure 2**

*Brief example of relevant theory.*

<p><b>Example</b></p> <p><b>Actor-Network Theory (ANT)</b></p> <p><b>Actor-Network Theory is a theoretical and methodological approach in analyzing symmetrically how human actors and non-human entities participate and influence the construction of social situations or systems (Latour, 2005)... --</b></p> <p><b>Non-human agency</b></p> <hr/> <p>In ANT, agency is defined by the ability to change, effect or influence something or someone. Therefore, also non-humans and material objects can obtain agency, for example, by influencing the course of the action and by shaping clients' life situations, interventions, or entire social services. Although the influence of non-humans is not necessarily intentional, the traces of it are observable (Latour, 2005)... --</p> <p><b>Black box</b></p> <hr/> <p>The actor-network constructs, for example, social systems, interventions, or practices. When all entities operate as a whole network, they are usually not observed. However, when the actor-network breaks down, the 'black box' and its elements become visible (Latour 2005)... --</p> <p><b>Translation process</b></p> <hr/> <p>In ANT, translation is a central concept and describes an innovation process acknowledging human and non-human actors. Michel Callon (1986) has defined four stages of a translation process in implementation and innovation: 1) problematization, 2) intersement (the etymology of interest is <i>inter-esse</i> i.e. to be in between; intressement refers to using different ways or devices to connect all actors needed for the process), 2) enrollment and 4) mobilization... --</p> <p><b>References</b></p> <hr/> <p>Latour, B. (2005). <i>Reassembling the social: An introduction to actor-network theory</i>. Oxford: Oxford University Press.</p>
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## Organizational Supports for Practice Research

**Figure 3***Cross-case highlights*

	Researcher-initiated PR China & Finland	Funder-initiated PR Norway & Belgium
Initial PR Study Aims	<p><u>China</u> – Explore: a) role of training/supervision in addressing staff burnout, b) ways of delivering social services in the midst of changing performance expectations of public administrators, and c) the need for nonprofit social service organizations to coordinate and collaborate services in response to different and changing community needs, contractual requirements and public policies</p> <p><u>Finland</u> – Share primarily qualitative and theoretical knowledge exchange with groups of practitioners using the pioneering theories of multidisciplinary pragmatist inquiry to improve practice</p>	<p><u>Norway</u> - Increase the quality of public social services within the context of systems reforms with special attention to service user involvement as well as bridge the gap between practice and research using a research and development framework</p> <p><u>Belgium</u> - Establish multiple academic collaborative centers to promote knowledge exchange between researchers and practitioners as illustrated by an intervention project designed to strengthening the relationship between staff and children in residential care in an effort to create family-like environments</p>
Evolving PR Questions	<p><u>China</u> - How did leaders of nonprofit social service organizations address issues of COVID-19 <i>internally</i> (develop or adjust social work service projects and positions, provide supervisory support and staff training, and engage in financial management) and <i>externally</i> (coordinate social services with other social organizations regarding epidemic prevention and control, and use social media to promote and share knowledge on social services with other community groups)?</p> <p><u>Finland</u> - How can line practitioners make use of theory and research in their daily practice by participating in five to six discussion meetings using one-page summaries of research studies and relevant theories selected by the group for their relevance to decision-making in various client situations and share their applications at the next group meeting?</p>	<p><u>Norway</u> – To what extent can a large country-wide research and demonstration project 1) promote structures and opportunities for equal cooperation between municipal social service providers/social workers, social service users, social work researchers and educators, 2) strengthen practice-based social research, and 3) expand knowledge designed to inform practice</p> <p><u>Belgium</u> – Can a contractual agreement for a long-term partnership between universities and practice organizations to focus on questions relevant for practice with the intention of developing a long-term partnership such as how do you amplify and respond to the voices of staff and children in residential care and what are the individual and systemic elements that support or inhibit the development of a positive living environment?</p>
Methods Used	<p><u>China</u> - Exploratory survey of the interorganizational and intraorganizational context of social work practice, followed by the identification of specific opportunities for nonprofit social service organizations to engage in practice research</p>	<p><u>Norway</u> – Use of dialogue seminars to capture and address the different perspectives used by service providers, service users, managers, and researchers.</p> <p><u>Belgium</u> – Staff training days and intervention meetings designed to develop a common language for a positive living</p>

## Organizational Supports for Practice Research

	<p><u>Finland</u> - Intervention assessment based on regularly scheduled group discussions and qualitative participant interviews to document participant evaluations and new leadership roles</p>	<p>environment and using a systematic way of monitoring and improving the present climate by sharing the intervention cycle (Plan-Do-Check-Act, PDCA) as well as using four standardized pre-and-post instruments to capture the voices of both the children and the staff culminating with the use of semi-structured interviews after project completion</p>
<p>Findings and Lessons Learned</p>	<p><u>China</u> - Delineating the challenges involved with conducting international practice research collaboration during COVID-19 with the goal of identifying strategies for developing local practice research studies and acknowledging the importance of “slow scholarship”.  <u>Finland</u> – Based upon this pilot intervention study, developed a Guide for future intervention to inform practice research based upon positive practitioner responses to life-long learning as well as the promotion of evidence-informed and theory-informed practitioners and related post-intervention leadership activities</p>	<p><u>Norway</u> – Need for more university investment in preparing research-minded practitioners, more funder attention to post-project practice research dissemination and utilization, and increased attention to maximize the voices of all participants in order to manage shared activities and develop a collective identity needed to understand and manage conflict  <u>Belgium</u> - Importance of creating “normal living conditions” that includes the siblings and parents who do not live in residential care and the central role of staff in creating a “home-like” activities (playing games, watching television) based on the staff-child relationship (being present, being available, listening, doing things together, involvement in daily decision-making) recognizing that the stress level experienced by staff impacts the behaviors of children. The obstacles to creating home-like activities include: government funding regulations that ignore “home-like activities”; extensive government justifications of actions and decisions required in youth care plans; lack of staff time to invest in building responsive relationships; and increased managerial and organizational duties in residential care</p>