Creating a culture of Research Mindedness in Social Work : A case study

Presenters/Contributors:

Anna Wilson

(& Cath Holmstrom in spirit only!)

Introductory Exercise:

What would worry you most about practitioners undertaking research?

Introductions and Background:

- Who are we and why we are both committed and interested and presenting on practitioner research

- About the Teaching Partnership:

- Structure of presentation (-the 'menu' so you know what's coming):
  - Appetisers
  - The main 'course'
  - The 'in between' course
  - 'Dessert'
  - Take away thoughts – the 'doggy bag'?!

- Discussion not a lecture, but also range of info to 'take away'….. Aiming to stimulate further reflections, actions and to share experiences of our work and one detailed example.

- Definitely work in progress rather than a final project report!

'Appetisers' and context: About the TP Practice Research Hub

- Why include research hub in broader Teaching Partnership plan and work?

- Main elements and activities

- Tricks and treats (was it fair to entice practitioners by identifying parallels between research and practice skills and then not have the support to all available/workload release)? Intended as a confidence booster and to challenge academic/practice divide, but….

- Lessons learned and impact – see later slides

- The projects (in outline) supported

- Differences between contexts and expectations

- In the UK, much debate remains about the nature of social work practice and priorities in terms of education and professional development (endless reviews – sw as a 'practical profession' or an 'applied social science')

- The status of social work academy and issues of professional identity and belonging; Othering'/divide versus between academy and practice, yet professional identification and shared commitment

- Inter-professional contexts, comparisons and expectations

Outline of Research Hub work: What we set out to do…

- Champion or beacon teams to lead the way embedding 'research mindedness'

- Events for practitioners x6 with 2 more planned

- Sessions for managers (about importance of venture)

- Survey to all local social workers in two local authorities about research confidence x4 (3 completed)

- Skill sets, confidence, social worker as social scientist and academic colleague identity/skills

- Power issues and different understandings, expectations and priorities!

- Will this lead to Improved access to CPD/PG research modules/PhDs?

- About culture change …. Not a quick process

What we have done (1): Practitioner survey

- Research minded confidence survey x4

- 1 before events and then during rest of project

- Baseline BUT not linked to same/specific practitioners ……

- Online, Likert-type scaled responses to 7 questions with 4 potential responses plus free text comment for examples or explanations for each question.

- Summary in progress of development!

What we have done (2): Events to support research mindedness and research itself

- 6 events with 2 more planned (after 2 initial preparatory sessions)

- Issues of access, timing and awareness despite publicity

- Events themselves without exception deemed energizing and positive

- Mixed engagement with managers

- All events involved examples of projects and activities being undertaken

- All events were collaboratively planned and delivered …. Refreshing for many (especially so reportedly by uni based colleagues!)

Feedback from Events: Practice research and research mindedness in practice

- I didn't realise so many practitioners were interested in research.

- I learnt how easy it is to talk about research with my colleagues – it's not as daunting as I thought.

- It was so beneficial to have allocated time to look at research, which is not often the case in the front line of social work.

- After ASYE, these research opportunities are not often available to qualified workers.

- I learnt useful ways to apply research to practice.

Impact: people said they would carry the session forward ….

- I will use the energy and ideas from today to look at how I can support BHCC to systematically adopt a research-minded focus in day-to-day work.

- I will consider trying to set up a journal club in my own team.

- I would be interested in exploring how research can be used more in court work. The challenge of court work is if you use research to argue a particular decision, barristers will look for research that argues the opposite, so it puts people off doing it.

- I'd like to see more grassroots approaches – I loved the journal club!

- I look forward to making research a **'normal' part of every-day practice.**

- **Reality?? Some of the above HAS happened despite multiple pressures**

Additional feedback from later events:

- We should definitely have regular forums/meet-ups.

- The event was too short – it could've been a whole day!

- Need to involve managers more

- Issues of time and managers' endorsement

- Importance of students in teams too in embedding research (and accessing it)

- Key for social workers based in different settings to come together

- How to build into daily practice – supervision, appraisals/annual reviews

- Different expectations, experiences and starting points for children's and adults' teams?

- Access to research problematic and not equal

- Useful tips regarding use of Twitter/social media for alerts and free access to research

- Need future events to focus upon methods, ethics and skills*

- Importance of focus upon improving outcomes … and saving money??

- Sense of huge energy and desire and commitment too – not just negative focus upon obstacles (as the earlier planning sessions had been)
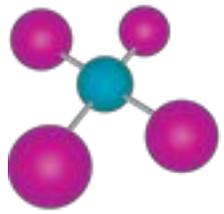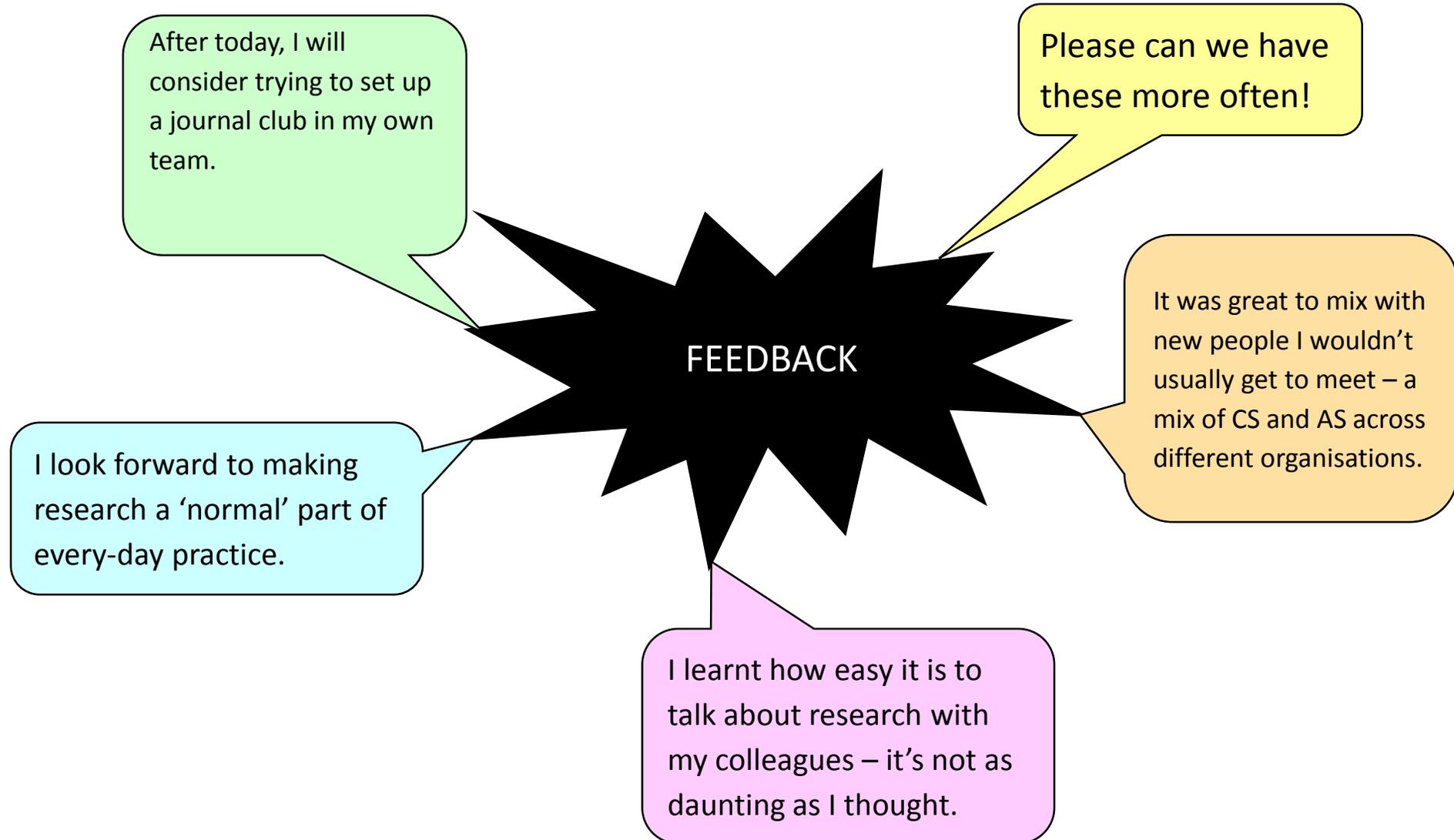
Literature: some introductory issues and debates

- What are the advantages of practice/practitioner research?

- Enquiry/evaluation – in most profs

- Fears about local impact or small scale – how valid?

- Might being near to the practice and researched context may make the res more meaningful to all involved?

- Extent to which relevant SW skills help research activity? Compromises – time, scale, pressure and dreams

- Obstacles…..time, others?

- Some countries have joined up plans and processes with more significant local and wider impact …..

- Much **tacit knowledge** exists in social work

- Insider/outsider researcher?

Terminology?!

- Practice-rich research
- Practice-near research
- Practice research
- Practitioner research
- Evidence- based practice
- Evidence informed practice
- Research mindedness
- **Does it matter?!**
- Ownership, barriers of language, status.

What we have done (3): Examples of our current practitioner research projects

- Anna B and Jackie – meaning of well-being used by practitioners in respect of those with and without capacity to make decisions about care and treatment under duties in relatively recent Care Act.

- Anna W – What is the impact of SWIFT assessments in the context of cases involved in at risk of legal proceedings?

- Shabanna W – experiences of families who have previously submitted formal complaint to social services

- Seb B – 'Cuckooing': a Thematic analysis of victims' lived experiences

- Brighton adults' Hospital team (whole team approach!) – models of health an social care integration and the understandings/misunderstandings and expectations that other professionals have of social workers

- Role of university based mentor/supervisor/collaborator…….

(And eventually….) The 'main course':

Project Title (research question?!): What is the impact of SWIFT assessments in the context of cases involved in/at risk of legal proceedings?

Context: What is SWIFT?

- An independently commissioned, multi disciplinary provider of specialist assessment and intervention at child protection thresholds in ESCC

- Commissioners set thematic targets and oversee governance arrangements

- Children's Social Care commission pre and in proceedings assessment, to include the following parental presentation:
  - Mental Health concerns
  - Drug or Alcohol misuse
  - Learning Disability
  - Sexual risk
  - Domestic abuse

- There is also a Child and Adolescent Team

- In addition we host Foundations and Family Keywork

Aims of my Research

- What difference (if any!?) does SWIFT assessment make to decision making within the MBA process?

- What difference does SWIFT assessment make to the progress of care applications made?

- Do the SWIFT assessment outcomes completed in pre-proceedings as part of the MBA process reflect the ultimate outcome of care proceedings?

- What are the implications for SWIFT practice?

Why?

- We (SWIFT) have been in place in the current format for about 5 years, as a response to the PLO.

- We get very little feedback

- Money is tight and we have to make savings ….. Link to potential bias?

- What learning might there be that we can share with the Judiciary and CAFCASS that might make the court processes more effective.

Research Plan

- Statistical Analysis:
  - Review of the basic details of all MBA cases from April '16 to March '17 (@120)

- Qualitative Analysis:
  - Deep dive analysis of 20 random cases that went to proceedings.

- Semi-Structured Interviews:
  - 2 Guardians, 2 Judges, 3-4 LA practitioners, 2 LA solicitors.

Existing Research (on this topic):

- Little around that I have been able to find.

- UAE and Bristol have completed some research. Statistics appear to be consistent nationally but the nuance of how proceedings are run seems to be culturally set geographically so difficult to learn from for us locally.

Challenges I experienced:

- Bias

- Performance anxiety (for me, but also I gather from my uni-based mentor!)

- Partnership?

- Planning for the inevitable obstacles

- The obvious time constraints

- Social work is collaborative, this isn't …

- Do still have to write the bloody thing up (and think about what next?!)

- I did not get the learning outcomes I wanted/expected

Strengths:

- I did not get the learning outcomes I wanted

- Path back into academia

- Interesting work that isn't the day job

- Developed additional skills (and frustrations)

- Did change my view on how we should move forward as a service

- Networking

'Dessert': Some themes from existing ('academic')literature:

Milena Heinsch & Mel Gray 2016, Making Research Count: What Australian Social Work Researchers Think,*Australian Social Work*, 69:4, 428-442:

- "A central question … is what happens to research evidence once it is produced. In social work, this has frequently translated to questions of whether and how social workers use research in practice" p428 .... *and if not used why not?*

- Research—and its impact—has become a primary avenue through which universities establish their usefulness, and are seen to contribute to their communities and to wider society in several contexts

- "Researchers who interact collaboratively with social workers, as well as being a source of knowledge, may also be an important determinant of whether practitioners see new knowledge as relevant and accessible. The assumption in the interaction model is that researchers can play a critical role in moving science to service and bridging the research–practice gap" (p429) – *so production of research not enough by itself*

Liz Beddoe (2011):

- Movement/s towards developing a profession more confidently grounded in research has been one of the most significant international trends in social work during the past decade

- "The Evidence-Based Practice (EBP) movement in social services, while contentious … has promoted the notion that social work practice be informed and developed from the results of scientifically conducted research" p558 (!!!!)

"University social work schools face similar challenges in many countries, as government-driven changes to the funding models for higher education drive outputs-focused research that is often challenging for schools … Orme and Powell (2008) note the confounding problem where social work departments in universities have traditionally recruited staff from practice because, in order to 'defend the identity and interests of the profession', such appointments were necessary because the first priority for practitioners moving into higher education was to deliver the curriculum for social work education." (Beddoe, op cit, p560)

- "Academic practice partnerships create a structure of mutual engagement that links the academic context with that of social work practice. They encourage social workers practising in health services to be **the "producers"** as well as the **consumers and disseminators of knowledge** (Joubert & Epstein, 2013). Such collaborations are not academically driven models but rather an evolving process reflecting the dynamic interaction between an academic institution and health social work department that is focused on mutually agreed aims and objectives. Therefore, they are able to support social workers in a shift to a practice research culture that is important in enabling social work to join an evidence-based and evidence-informed practice context within health (Joubert & Epstein, 2013)" p352

'Take away course': Issues arising and lessons/frustrations

- Projects were agreed with employers… but in reality no time release

- Time everything takes and frustrations – e.g. prep, ethics and what is needed for ethical and governance approval

- Changes in workload and posts/managers (ie the original 'backer'); multiple pressures in a time of severe austerity

- Cultural contexts and 'divides' – real or imagined – between university and local authorities even when relationships are broadly strong – negotiating relationships and roles.

- Place of academic knowledge in practice and value of practice leadership in university

- In the first year the only one to complete was the one with academic co-researching – learning for the following years, or adapting expectations!

- Not fitting in to external/broader timescales (and this is ok!!!)

- Culture change takes forever!

Next steps for all aspects of research hub:

- **Events**: focused upon getting started with realistic research question and approach, timelines and ethics; embedding longer term support mechanisms to ensure a degree of sustainability

- **Survey:** end of TP phase of survey and review data

- **Projects:** 2 new ones to start 2019-20; completion of others with presentations and summary reports (internal and external). Importance of disseminating these. Publish learning where appropriate (and this is a pressure for university-based staff of course especially).

- **Sustainability and questionnaire learning:** presentations to managers and highlighting good practice and relevance for service performance and priorities.

- **CPD opportunities at universities – support?**

A few references:

- Fouche, C & Lunt, N. 'Reflections on a Practice Project for Mentoring Research Capacity amongst Social Work Practitioners' *Journal of Social Work* 10(4) 391–406

- Jouberta, L & Alison Hocking, A 2015, Academic Practitioner Partnerships: A Model for Collaborative Practice Research in Social Work *Australian Social Work*, Vol. 68, No. 3, 352–363

- Beddoe, L 2011, 'Building research capacity for social work practitioners: a regional perspective' *British Journal of Social Work* 41, 557–575

- Kalpana Goel,K, Hudson, C & Jane Cowie SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION 2018, VOL. 37, NO. 8, 1028–1043

- Heinsch, M & Gray, M. 2016 'Making Research Count: What Australian Social Work Researchers Think' *Australian Social Work,* 69:4, 428-442,

Contacts:

Anna Wilson: Anna.Wilson@eastussex.gov.uk

Cath Holmstrom (University of Brighton): c.holmstrom@brighton.ac.uk