



Clinical education

Development of evidence based practice in academic service partnerships: Experiences of working life representatives from social and health care sectors



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ABSTRACT

Learning about how to develop and lead the implementation of evidence based practice (EBP) in services is an important part of the education of developers and managers for the social and health care sectors. In order to develop this teaching and to support the development of EBP in services, a Teaching Development Effort (TDE) was conducted by establishing academic service partnerships (ASPs) and connecting Master's students' assignments with them. The TDE was conducted as a part of a larger project whose main aims were to strengthen, develop and renew transfers of knowledge and competence between higher education institutions and workplaces, and to strive for a more multidisciplinary quality in workplace innovations.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe the experiences of working life representatives regarding the development of EBP in ASPs within the social and health care sectors. The data were collected by email interviews. Eight working life representatives' participated in the study. The informants were asked to describe the usefulness of the plan that had been prepared by the students regarding the implementation of EBP, and to describe the significance of this ASP for the development of working life. A qualitative content analysis method was used when analyzing the data.

Virtually all the informants stated that the plan prepared by the students, for the implementation of EBP, was entirely ready to be taken into use in the form they had finished it. The significance of the ASP was described in terms of the ASP assisting in improving the quality of the service. Furthermore, the workplace-based student assignment topics, external views to support the development of EBP, and the theoretical approach used by the students were valuable. The ASP provided opportunities for the practitioners to learn new things, inspiration to look to the future, and assistance in the implementation of time management practices.

ASPs have potential to support EBP in services and the use of them is recommended.

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1. Introduction

The importance of evidence based practice (EBP) in social and health care services has been acknowledged. However, implementation of EBP has often proved to be a challenging task (Bellamy et al., 2013; Severinsson, 2012). Positive attitudes of professionals toward EBP have been reported in the context of nursing (Duffy et al., 2015; Melnyk et al., 2012) and social work (Aarons et al., 2009; Parrish and Rubin, 2012). However, deficiencies associated with consistent implementation of EBP have been reported, both in

nursing (Duffy et al., 2015; Karma et al., 2015; Melnyk et al., 2012) and in social work (Parrish and Rubin, 2012). Many kinds of barriers for EBP in nursing have been reported, the main barriers often being related to a lack of resources, for example, time and competencies, and a non-supportive organizational culture (Fairbrother et al., 2016; Gerrish et al., 2008; Khammarnia et al., 2015; Melnyk et al., 2012). The same kinds of barriers have also been reported within social work (Franklin and Hopson, 2007).

In the promotion of EBP in organizations, leaders (Sandström et al., 2011; Stetler et al., 2014) and other professionals who have duties related to the development of the practices, e.g. advanced practice nurses in the health care sector (Melnyk et al., 2014), have many duties related to EBP. In a Master's Degree program

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'Development and Management of Social Services and Health Care' (90 ects) at one Finnish university of applied sciences, the students have studied topics related to the duties of the managers and developers on a 2 ects course 'Development and Management of Evidence Based Practice' (later 'D & M of EBP'). In 2014, the faculty joined a national project on 'Creating a strong R & D (research & development) profile for Master's Degree programmes'. The main aims of the project were to strengthen, develop and renew transfers of knowledge and competence between higher education institutions and workplaces, as well as to strive for a more multidisciplinary quality in workplace innovations, thus bringing teaching and workplaces closer together. To meet these aims, a Teaching Development Effort (later TDE) on the 'D & M of EBP' course was established. The TDE included academic service partnerships (later ASP) with commissions for the students. The aim of this article is to report on the study findings related to the experiences of the representatives of working life regarding the ASP they participated in. The expressions 'representative of working life' and 'working life representative' refer to the members of the social services or health care staff working in service organisations. The commission for the students involved preparing a plan for the implementation of EBP for the workplace.

Implementation was defined as "a specific set of activities designed to put an activity or programme of a known dimension into practice" (Fixsen et al., 2005, p. 5). In their review, Fixsen et al. (2005) categorized implementation as occurring on three degrees: a paper implementation, a process implementation and a performance implementation. A paper implementation refers to preparing a recorded plan on how the change will be accomplished in the rationale adoption of new policies and procedures. The TDE reported here included an assignment whereby small groups of students were instructed to focus on the paper implementation, i.e. the students were supposed to prepare a plan for the implementation of EBP in a working unit or organization which was a partner of the faculty and had given a commission to the students. As the explicit use of a theoretical approach is recommended when planning the implementation of EBP (Cullen and Adams, 2012; ICEBeRG, 2006), the students were supposed to use a theoretical approach in their work.

2. Background

The concept of an Academic Service Partnership (ASP) was defined as "an officially structured partnership for a university and a practice setting with a shared vision that builds on strength, demonstrated collaboration, and supports change for the sake of improvements" (DeGeest et al., 2013, p. 447). In a systematic review by DeGeest et al. (2013), it was found that approximately one third of the ASPs was highly structured and two thirds was moderately structured. Resource availability was considered as a key facilitator, and open and frequent communication was deemed essential to ensure that effective cooperation took place.

From the point of view of nursing workplaces, the evidence on the outcomes of ASPs including EBP-related activities is associated with baccalaureate nursing education. Working life representatives have been satisfied with the students' EBP projects at clinical sites (Stone and Rowles, 2007). The projects have offered opportunities to educate nursing staff and patients and to improve the overall level of nursing practice (Stone and Rowles, 2007) and EBP (Beal, 2012). In ASPs, the nursing staff has benefitted from faculty knowledge and experience to improve EBP (Beal, 2012; Dobalian et al., 2014) and the faculty has had access to subjects for their research (Beal, 2012). It has been found that inter-organizational teamwork is a critical factor in enabling the partnerships, and that basing stable relationships on long-term commitments is

important (Dobalian et al., 2014).

There is scant literature on the experiences of social workers of ASPs. However, Drabble et al. (2013) did describe a framework for a partnership between a university and local child welfare agencies and reported that the agencies received enhanced research capacity during the partnership.

3. Academic service partnerships as part of the teaching development effort

The aims of the TDE, which included the ASPs, were as follows:

- Students' learning aim: to prepare a realistic plan for the use of a service for the implementation of EBP
- Services: to develop EBP for a particular workplace
- Faculty: to develop the quality of teaching about EBP on the Master's Degree program called Development and Management in Health Care and Social Services

The students' work in ASPs was based on the idea that in order for the successful implementation of EBP to occur, there has to be a plan describing the purposeful implementation processes in sufficient detail (Fixsen et al., 2005). Moreover, the plan should be theoretically-informed. In order to support both the students' learning and the efforts of the services in the development of EBP, partnerships with services were established. More specifically, these partnerships with services were created in order to obtain real working life commissions for the students to use when preparing an implementation plan for a particular EBP action. Because the scope of the course was very limited, only 2 ects, the commission had to be restricted to preparing the plan; the students were not supposed to participate in further stages of the implementation.

The course 'D & M of EBP' started in January, 2015 in a new format. After an online self-directed learning phase, the students participated in a contact learning day, during which they were placed in small groups and given their commissions from workplaces. The topics of the different commissions were to prepare implementation plans for the following practices: 1) rehabilitative work experience within adult social care services; 2) method of motivational interviewing for mental health services; 3) the WHO/Unicef Baby Friendly Initiative in a maternity hospital; 4) a model to prevent falls in older people at a long-term care ward; 5) changes in practices in the writing of a discharge summary in nursing documentation at an operative and conservative care clinic; and 6) journal clubs at an operative care clinic. The commissions were part of the quality improvement of the services.

A total of 20 students were divided into six small groups. Each group then received one of the commissions. As it was not possible to take the earlier education and working experience of these students into account when making contracts with services about the commissions, some of the students received a commission in a context that was familiar to them, whereas for others, the context was unknown.

In the contract between the faculty and the service organizations, each service organization agreed to have at least one staff member as a contact person to the student group. The contacts agreed to meet their student group at least three times during the process. Their responsibilities in these meetings at different phases of the process were as follows: 1) to help the students in their assessment of the starting point; 2) to evaluate the plan in the middle phase of the process and provide suggestions and instructions for the continuation; 3) to provide feedback regarding the final evaluation of the plan. The teacher was always willing to offer guidance and support to the students and the contact persons

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