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### ORIGINAL PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT AND RESEARCH

## Improving public health nursing: an example of community-based research in Norway

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### Abstract

*Background:* A research project was organised between a university and a municipal mother-child health service to develop a partnership between academia, practice and service users, with the intent of increasing research based education and practice development. The university is responsible for high quality in the education of health professionals and the mother-child health service is responsible for high quality in the area of public health. The partnership between higher education and the public health service took place in the frame of community-based research.

*Aims and objectives:* The research had two aims; to describe the community-based research process in the context of the mother-child health service, and to explore public health nurse managers' experiences of taking part in research collaboration with the university.

*Design and methods:* The study had an evolving design, anchored in the methodology of community-based research, being change oriented and participant based. The results are based on minutes from project meetings, research field notes, and on in-depth interviews with managers.

*Results:* The public health nurse managers took an active role in the research group during all phases of the project. They acquired a scientific orientation and played an important role in linking various research activities by serving as 'door-openers' for the establishment of a mutual research culture. They highlighted relevant problem areas and received updated research results, which contributed to research-based knowledge and improved practice.

*Conclusions:* Use of research results can shape organisational culture and enhance practice.

*Implications for practice:* Community-based research contributes to bridging the gap between academia and practice, and facilitates the use of research to improve services. Collaboration enhances the status of public health nurse managers vis-à-vis stakeholders, as well as contributing to the creation of an innovative role. Engaging in partnership between practice and academia facilitates the students' engagement and contribution to practice development.

**Keywords:** Academia, collaboration, community-based research, higher education, partnership, public health nurse manager, practice

### Introduction

In recent years the relationship between higher education and actors in the practical field has been in focus, leading to the development of collaborative activities intended to increase research-based

education and practice (Strand et al., 2003). Higher education authorities have an obligation to open education and research to the general public and ensure its usefulness to society. *The World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-first Century: Vision and Action* (UNESCO, 1998) states that higher education institutions should contribute to change that promotes solidarity, equality and justice. Higher education should strengthen its 'role of service to society' (p.5) through research and dissemination of results relevant to the needs of society, which promote human and social development in the light of globalisation (Global University Network for Innovation Report, 2008). Similarly, in relation to the education of health professionals, *The Lancet Commission* (2010) calls for a global social movement of all stakeholders 'to promote a new century of transformative professional education' in order to improve health systems (p 3).

In order to maintain the relationship between research and social needs, research should be conducted in collaboration with local actors, through 'community research activities' (European Commission, 2002). The goal is to promote a mutual research culture that addresses citizens' social needs and thus helps formulate policies for the future. According to *The World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-first Century: Vision and Action* (UNESCO, 1998), students should be able to identify and understand themes and activities related to human rights, democracy, peace and social justice through research and critical thinking with academics and local actors. Hence, higher education institutions educating health and social care professionals close to the relevant practical field provide unique opportunities to engage in collaboration projects involving academics and students, practitioners and service users (Willumsen and Studsrød, 2010).

In the area of public health nursing and mother-child health service, the managers are responsible for ensuring that the health services are provided in accordance with democratic norms and values such as equality, human rights, user participation and openness to public scrutiny (Rainey, 2003). Managers have an obligation to maintain an organisational culture that supports the goals of the service, and one of their core functions is to initiate practice development (Carr and Clark, 2010). Service quality is linked to knowledge and research-based practice. Although the call to use research in practice is clear, nurses report barriers such as lack of education, time and support (Markussen, 2007). However, research demonstrates that nurses are more likely to use results if they contribute to the research process, receive support from managers and colleagues and are educated in scientific methodology (Johansson et al., 2010). Implementation of research in practice and collaboration between managers, academics and practitioners, are recommended as means of overcoming these barriers (Markussen, 2007). Thus, there appear to be connections between higher education's societal responsibility and the obligation of public health managers to ensure that engaging in joint research projects will benefit both parties in various ways. This was the rationale for initiating a project grounded in community-based research. The present study presents an example of research collaboration between a university and municipal mother-child health service, and the ways in which public health nurse managers were involved in the process.

## **Background**

Internationally, in the past 10 to 15 years, higher education has become involved in research activities in partnership with different actors ('communities') and the focus has been local, national or global. In line with the higher education international guidelines (UNESCO, 1998; European Commission, 2002), community-based research has become a priority area at the Faculty of Social Sciences at University of Stavanger, addressing questions of importance for teaching and research as well as for professionals' practice contexts, where nurses work with service users. In this setting, community-based research is understood as 'a partnership of students, faculty and community members who collaboratively engage in research with the purpose of solving a pressing community problem or effecting social change' (Strand et al., 2003, p 3). An important goal for the university is to involve students in research activities, so that they can gain experiences of research during their

studies and develop so-called 'research mindedness' (Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2005). Thus community-based research can be regarded as a relevant way of collaborating with the practical field, and masters students are encouraged to become involved in practice-based research projects, such as the mother-child health service project.

In Norway, public health nursing is part of the free public mother-child health service, which seeks to promote the health of the child and supervise all parents in the area of childcare. The service is organised in a municipal unit, provided by public health nurses and generally administered by a head public health nurse (Norwegian Ministry of Health and Care Service, 2003; Clancy, 2007). The mother-child health service programme consists of: home visits when the child is newborn; immunisation; health education and guidance for parents; approximately monthly check-ups of the child's growth and development during the first year of life; followed by check-ups every second year until the child starts school. At each encounter, general issues concerning the well being of the child and family are discussed. Almost 100 % of children attend this service (Norwegian Directorate of Health, 2010) and most parents seem satisfied with it (Seierstad and Straand, 2005). According to the Norwegian Directorate for Health (2010), the service is required to be professional, reliable and engage in practice-related research, although it is stated that research within the service is limited.

### **Previous research**

In order to review research on collaboration between education and practice in the area of public health nursing, a computer search on research published between 2001 and 2011 was conducted in January 2012, using the databases Academic Search Elite, SocINDEX, CINAHL, Medline, and Psyc Info. The keywords used were: community research; action research; higher education; university; collaboration; participation; and public health. The electronic search revealed 59 studies. After critical screening of the 59 abstracts, excluding studies evaluating practice and intervention programmes as well as studies related to critical situation, 13 studies remained. The inclusion criteria for these were related to community, involving higher education and professionals in practice. In addition a manual search was performed, mainly in Scandinavian journals, which revealed five studies. After reading these studies, three main categories emerged: one category related to identifying needs in the community and developing services; a second related to increasing the quality of education in community practice for students; and a third related to barriers for practitioners in applying research.

Most of the studies identified by the electronic search were from the USA, and several of these were related to vulnerable citizens (Farquhar et al., 2005; Ozer et al., 2008; Waechter et al., 2009; Thomas et al., 2009; Jones et al., 2009; Baiardi et al., 2010; Zandee et al., 2010). Two studies, (Ozer et al., 2008; Cook et al., 2010) describe programmes developed by the university and the citizens. Another study, (Foster et al., 2010) describes collaboration between university researchers, maternity care providers, and community members as a tool to improve maternity care service. Additionally, participatory action research (Waechter et al., 2009) and community-based research (Jones et al., 2009; Baiardi et al., 2010) are described as tools for assessing health and identifying health concerns in the community. Two more of the studies, (Farquhar et al., 2005; Thomas et al., 2009) apply community-based research to promote health with citizens in a culture other than that of the researchers. An Israeli study (Schmid and Blit-Cohen, 2009) and several studies from the USA (Brosnan et al., 2005; Marcus et al., 2010; Zandee et al., 2010) describe partnership between university and community as a way to foster students' education in the area of public health. However, in most of the studies (Thomas et al., 2009; Ozer et al., 2008; Cook et al., 2010; Zandee et al., 2010) the collaborating parties in the communities seem to be stakeholders or citizens of a cultural group or members of an organisation, while in other studies (Jones et al., 2009; Waechter et al., 2009; Baiardi et al., 2010; Foster et al., 2010) the collaborating parties in the community were professionals engaged in health or social services. The process of establishing partnership between

academia and the community appears to be influenced by several factors, such as spending time on issues related to the research process, organisational structure, priority setting, group cohesiveness, power relations and group dynamic. Additionally, collaboration improves when based on trust and mutuality (Brosnan et al., 2005; Thomas et al., 2009; Baiardi et al., 2010; Marcus et al., 2010).

The manual search revealed studies (Hjälte, 2000; Bergmark and Lundström, 2002; Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2005; Markham and Carney, 2008; Hernes, 2011) that describe practitioners' striving to apply evidence-based practice. An Irish study (Markham and Carney, 2008) illuminates challenges for public health nurses, and a Swedish study (Hjälte, 2000) describes the gap between research and practice by nurses, arguing that practical knowledge seems most useful in practice and that professionals appear more reluctant to read and apply research-based knowledge. Issues concerning lack of application of research also occur in other professions, for example social work (Bergmark and Lundström, 2002; Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2005).

Research on collaboration between education and professionals in practice related to public health revealed important areas to be explored and developed, which may benefit practitioners and service users as well as academics/students. This was the starting point for a mutual research project initiated by the University of Stavanger/Department of Health and Social Care and a local municipal mother-child health service (Willumsen and Ivesdal, 2008), involving researchers, masters students, public health nurse managers and service users.

### **Aims**

The aim of the study was to describe the community-based research process in the context of the mother-child health service. An additional aim was to explore the public health nurse managers' experiences of taking part in research collaboration with the university.

### **Design**

We applied an emergent design that unfolded in the research process, where the research group made decisions reflecting the situation and posed new questions as the research progressed (Polit and Beck, 2004). Thus, the study was inspired by participatory action research (Polit and Beck, 2004), with a methodology grounded in community-based research. According to Strand et al. (2003), several action research traditions have influenced the development of community-based research, in which the actors involved participate in their own research in order to achieve social change. Community-based research is not a research method, but rather an approach and methodological anchoring in terms of the application and process of research (Minkler and Wallerstein, 2003). Traditional research methods are used within community-based research, for example, in-depth interviews or surveys. The new aspect is the researcher's attitude, which decides how, by whom and for whom the research is set up and performed (Strand et al., 2003). The partnership often involves practitioners and service users and the role and level of participation of each individual partner can vary. The objective is to investigate and document social inequality and the health needs of marginalised groups of citizens, and to achieve positive changes by altering structures and/or developing services. Community-based research is relevant to a number of professions and disciplines, such as public health, and joint working with a change-oriented and participant-based approach is central, where all parties work together throughout the research process (Israel et al., 1998). Taking part in the research process is in itself a goal of community-based research, as it may contribute to empowerment and change for all participants.

Israel et al. (1998) developed key principles of community-based research when improving public health, including: recognition of community as unit of identity; building on strengths and resources; facilitating collaborative partnerships in all phases of the research; integrating knowledge and action for mutual benefit and promoting co-learning and empowering processes as well as involving cyclical

and iterative processes; addressing health from both positive and ecological perspectives; and disseminating findings and knowledge gained to all partners. These principles are in line with 'shared values in practice development' (Canterbury Christ Church University, 2011). According to Kock and Kralik (2006) professionals are urged to work together with the service users, as health promotion intrinsically involves working with people; this also applies to research. Furthermore, equity, solidarity and participation are central values when applying health promotion in public health nursing. Hence, public health nursing and community-based research appear to have some links, such as the value base, the participative aspect and empowering of individuals and groups which, when combined, may complement and enrich each other, representing a relevant methodology for the mother-child health service project.

### **Methods and phases of the research process**

Based on the methodology presented above, thematic concerns and concrete methods were determined during the research process. Data were collected during the process by minutes from project meetings, research field notes and participative observations on how the process was experienced by those involved. Additionally, in-depth interviews including reflections on the public health nurse managers' experiences were performed at the end of the research process (Polit and Beck, 2004). The analysis of the collaboration was carried out during the process, together with all parties who worked together (Israel et al., 1998). The analysis of the in-depth interviews was inspired by qualitative content analysis (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004).

The following phases are central to a community-based research project (Strand et al., 2003):

1. Choosing a problem
2. Identifying resources and solutions
3. Developing a plan
4. Implementing the plan
5. Evaluation

The phases formed a main framework, and the community-based research process progressed in parallel with the students' masters projects.

### **Ethical considerations**

The public health nurse managers approved the study and provided their informed consent at the time of the interviews. The Norwegian Social Science Data Services was consulted in order to ascertain the legal regulations and ethical guidelines regulating research, and a licence was not deemed necessary. However, informed consent from the project group participants to disseminate an anonymous description of the research activities had been previously obtained.

### **Project organisation and participants**

A project group was formed comprising two public health nurse managers and a psychiatrist (who moved after one year) from the municipality, two researchers and two masters students from the university and two parents/service users. The meetings took place at the mother-child health service centre in the afternoon – the most convenient time for parents and professionals. The project group met ten times between 2007 and 2009.

The five phases of the community-based research process will be described below, with focus on the public health nurse managers' experiences. Hence, the results and the description of the research process are interwoven.

### **The research process**

In phase 1, choosing a problem, the project group started by identifying issues of mutual interest and the public health nurse managers suggested some areas for exploration. One of the managers had recently conducted a service user inquiry and in view of some of the results, she was concerned about how parents perceived the social support received for their parental role from the mother-child health service. Another issue was the public health nurse managers' concern that women might be depressed after giving birth, and how to identify those at risk and provide adequate services. Comments from the students, parents and researchers were presented and relevant topics discussed and reflected on in the project group. One of the public health nurse managers considered it very interesting that a student shared her fascination about the results of the service user survey and found it 'very inspiring because then I knew the student was engaged in something very useful for us'.

The researchers' role was to ensure that the scientific standard for masters projects was adhered to and to help group members to express and clarify what they considered important for formulating research questions. At this point, the project members also discussed the final phases of the research process in order to anticipate their relevance and possible implications for the public health nurses in terms of data collection and for services users regarding changes – bearing in mind the overarching objective to improve public health nurse practice and develop services for children and families.

After several meetings the project group concluded its discussion and the two students found suitable research questions for their masters projects:

1. Parents' perceptions of social support from the public health nurse and coping with the parental role during the child's first year of life: a qualitative interview study with parents as service users.
2. Birth depression and mother's meeting with the public health nurse: implementation of a pilot study based on validated screening scales in order to detect and follow up possible depression.

Phase 2, identifying resources and solutions, mainly focused on practical issues pertaining to how the students could proceed with their studies, planning data collection and looking at how the public health nurse managers could facilitate data collection in their organisation in collaboration with the public health nurses involved by identifying and recruiting participants, i.e. professionals and parents/service users. Since the public health nurse managers were in charge of their services, there were no difficulties in terms of access. They regarded the students as resources and contributors to practical development and service improvement. The role of the public health nurse managers was that of go-between to facilitate data collection, talk directly to the public health nurses involved and suggest how to do things, inform and explain. One manager stated: 'I was the contact person for the public health nurses, the students and the parents.' She reported that the students were allowed to use the managers' offices and that she organised practical matters, which she did not consider as exceeding her ordinary managerial role, since she was familiar with the services and made use of her experience.

During this phase the students began their database searches and collected literature and research results relevant to their research questions. They presented research overviews to the project group and received valuable feedback on their work. The public health nurse managers were presented with a copy of the preliminary literature overview; they were impressed and found it enriching 'to obtain access to theory in an easier way than doing it yourself', which encouraged them to explore more theory.

The project group made further plans for the project (phase 3) and the implementation of the results. It was agreed that the students should present preliminary findings to the project group as a starting point for mutual analysis, reflection and discussion, in order to obtain open-minded feedback, which served as valuable input to their masters theses. Implementation activities were also suggested and planned, including a seminar for all public health nurses in the municipality, at which the students should present an overview of available research along with the findings from their studies. This was followed by group work focusing on particular questions that motivated the nurses' reflections on how to use and implement the results. Meetings with stakeholders in the municipal administration, as well as an evaluation meeting in the project group, were also planned. In this phase the public health nurse managers informed the project group about how their services were organised as part of the municipal administration, and discussed their role as managers and how they could use the research results and initiate possible change. It was decided to arrange a seminar for all public health nurses, 26 in total, and the public health nurse managers wanted to plan the programme and contribute to formulating the group work questions. One of the public health nurse managers stated: 'I was very pleased that I was involved in formulating the questions...because then I was able to steer it,' referring to her duty to deal with and follow up her employees' reactions. The public health nurse managers also took care of practical details.

In the implementation phase 4, the seminar took place according to the plan. The students presented their work, were asked questions and received valuable feedback from the nurses. The public health nurse managers were extremely satisfied and emphasised the importance of someone from outside their organisation focusing on issues of relevance to their service. It not only supported their work, but also was essential for anchoring the project, thus legitimising their ownership of it. They emphasised that this project was not something they did to be 'kind to some masters students' or researchers, referring to their previous research experiences of collecting survey data for a research institution.

The evaluation phase 5 primarily consisted of an evaluation meeting in the project group and dissemination of the results. Additionally, interviews with the public health nurse managers were conducted, experiences described with reflection on episodes and issues presented retrospectively. For example, the public health nurse managers emphasised the importance of being able to use the research results: 'We have utilised the students' research results in all discussions and planning', thus highlighting the potential of masters projects to illustrate and change concrete matters in various ways. The public health nurse managers also stressed that the successful collaboration and partnership with the university gave them higher status in the eyes of colleagues and stakeholders in the municipality.

The public health nurse managers were invited to join one of the researchers at international conferences ([www.ccpn.info](http://www.ccpn.info) and [www.scienceshops.org/](http://www.scienceshops.org/)). They reflected on the experience of being introduced to these networks as well as academia, saying it represented 'a new world...gaining a totally different perspective on many things...being a part of the scientific community and experiencing what is going on at the university was very rewarding'. They also wrote an article published in the Norwegian Journal of Public Health Nursing (*Helsesøstre*) (Willumsen and Ivesdal, 2008). During the project, two open seminars were organised at the university in collaboration with the public health nurse managers and the advanced public health nursing programme, to which researchers were invited as keynote speakers on current research about the role of public health nurses in postnatal depression. Responsibility for the practical and financial arrangements was shared between public health nurse education and the mother-child health service. The public health nurse managers were also invited to the masters students' oral examination, which was much appreciated.

## **Discussion**

This article describes a community-based research project and how the research process progressed in the context of the mother-child health service. Furthermore, the public health nurse managers' experiences were explored. The international higher education framework appears to be both relevant and motivating when it comes to initiating practice-based programmes such as community-based research. The goals of the international framework, community-based research and public health nursing are similar in terms of dealing with urgent societal issues and facilitating the participation of individuals and groups, which represents formal support for collaborative initiatives. Solidarity, human rights, equality and empowerment to strengthen people's well being, self-esteem and coping constitute a central value base in both public health nursing and community-based research. The community-based research approach is similar to public health nursing strategy in that it involves the actors and trusts them to decide the agenda.

### ***Public health nurse managers' experiences of the research group***

Formal agreements regulating research collaboration may serve as an important framework at local level. Such agreements existed in this project and higher education institutions educating professionals often have them in place due to their close contact with the respective practical contexts. A project group was organised to implement the project, recruit important actors and agree a meeting place. The findings indicate that the project group was central for the public health nurse managers. Participation in this group gave them an opportunity to influence the issues to be discussed and pose relevant questions in order to highlight vulnerable groups or services that they considered of low standard (Raeburn and Rootman, 1998; Markham and Carney, 2008). Throughout the research process, the project group represented a forum for critical reflection and clarification. The public health nurse managers influenced the content, while reciprocal reflection took place during the various phases. They also initiated discussions, commented on suggestions from other members and provided feedback to the students. Moreover, the public health nurse managers learned from the members of the group – for instance, to value service users' contributions and how to rely on and integrate their knowledge in a broader sense, e.g. at an earlier stage when designing a survey and not only in response to a manager's propositions. In the same way, taking account of service users' needs and involving them in improving services is a central value of public health nursing (Green and Tones, 2010; Raeburn and Rootman, 1998).

### ***The public health nurse managers' development of a scientific orientation***

As the research process developed, the public health nurse managers obtained available knowledge of the phenomena investigated by the students, which was found to be an easy way of being introduced to previous research as well as allowing an opportunity to discuss and reflect on its relevance. It is usually difficult for public health nurse managers to search for research results in their practical context, due to technical barriers that impede access to databases in the community as well as lack of skill in performing such searches on the part of the individual (Johansson et al., 2010). However, the students' up-to-date research overviews seemed to motivate the public health nurse managers to search for additional knowledge and use it when documenting and arguing in favour of changes and improvements in services. This new knowledge appeared to strengthen their self-esteem and increase their sense of being up to date, contributing value to their effort to participate in research and create greater interest in their services. Thus, participation in a community-based research project facilitates access to previous research results, stimulates further interest in scientific knowledge (Solomons and Spross, 2011) and develops skills related to applying research-based knowledge in practice (Bergmark and Lundstöm, 2002; Markussen, 2007), consequently creating increased support for research-based practice among management (Johansson et al., 2010).



### ***Time and resources***

Participation in community-based research places demands on the managers' time and resources in terms of completing the project, attending project group meetings and being available for the students. The results reveal that the public health nurse managers in the present study did not find this particularly problematic, although they stated that it consumed a fair amount of time. However, they emphasised the beneficial relationships (Mayo and Tsey, 2009) and the group members' willingness to come to their offices at a convenient time. It is important to clarify expectations related to time, the need for flexibility and the resources available at the start of the project, which also applies to the students, who may find collaboration time consuming. Moreover, it is important not to focus on too many issues in order to avoid overwork (Lantz, 2001).

### ***Students' research on public health nursing***

In the case of the students, the findings demonstrate that participating in community-based research was a valuable opportunity to gain access to research in the practical field (Mayo and Tsey, 2009), become involved in current issues of societal significance and contribute to useful service improvements (UNESCO, 1998; Brosnan, 2005). They acquired experience of research in combination with feedback from public health nurse managers, who also assisted them in recruiting participants for their projects. The students found it stimulating to be members of a research group that provided an opportunity for critical reflection during the research process as well as proximity to service users and professionals. The students also contributed valuable knowledge to public health nursing and service improvement.

The findings indicate that the students' close contact with public health nurse managers and service users and their reciprocal discussions created a mutual research culture that promoted research-based knowledge (Staffileno and Carlson, 2010), thus supporting the managers' ambitions to shape the organisational culture (Kane Urrabazo, 2006) – for example, the public health nurse managers' decision to prioritise the integration of research activities in their position. The collaboration contributed to a scientific orientation for all as well as demonstrating the importance of basing research on issues that are central to public health nursing and useful for service improvement, illustrating the development of 'research mindedness' (Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2005). In other words, community-based research provides a way of reducing the barriers between practice and research (Markussen, 2007; Staffileno and Carlson, 2010). Furthermore, project group members' activities supported the development of research-based practice in public health nursing, which is a core function of the public health nurse manager (Carr and Clarke, 2010).

In order to take advantage of the full potential of community-based research, a long-term collaboration perspective between the university and community is necessary, including the opportunity to implement experiences and changes in the educational setting. Community-based research projects will lead to challenges in academia regarding the traditional form of collaboration between researchers who represent experts 'from outside' and the practical field defined as the object of study. These challenges must be handled internally at the university and by the broader research community (Stoecker, 2008). However, when masters (and PhD) students are involved, their projects will ensure scientific standards. Additionally, higher education has an obligation to develop the students' 'research mindedness'.

### ***Methodological considerations***

In line with Koch and Kralik's (2006) suggestions for quality and rigour, this study has sought to present authentic information about the collaborating partners, focusing on how the public health nurse managers participated in the community-based research process in order to improve the mother-child health service. The trustworthiness in terms of credibility was supported by in-depth interviews of the managers, member check of citations and feedback during the research process.

The close collaboration was characterised by reflexivity in the project group, the managers' support and approval of decision making, which they found relevant and meaningful. This attended to the ongoing validation of data and analysis, and made the community-based research process accessible and auditable. Based in the contexts of higher education and mother-child health service focusing on the role of managers, the findings may be transferable to similar contexts and collaborative partnerships that may enhance experiences and knowledge developed by researchers, professionals and service users. However, community-based research studies may have potential limitations – factors that affect the relationship between the researcher and the participants, such as the degree of participation, ownership of the data and findings, as well as practical flexibility and dissemination of the research results (Strand et al., 2003). The researchers were conscious of such factors, although they were not explicitly mentioned in this study. The public health nurse managers were change oriented, open to novelty and focused on improvements, which constituted an excellent starting point for applying research in the area of public health service.

### **Conclusion**

The present study illustrates the uniqueness of collaboration between public health nursing and community-based research and illustrates that mutual influence on the research process contributes to reducing the gap between practice and research, which can shape organisational culture and develop public health nursing practice.

Although this is a small study, the findings may serve as an inspiration for developing similar projects to explore the benefits of community-based research in public health nursing, as well as in other disciplines. Moreover, the public health nurse managers' experiences of linking education and practice in a research partnership should be further investigated and the findings transferred to managers in other health and social care contexts.

### **Implications for practice**

Research collaboration, such as community-based research, contributes to bridging the gap between education and practice in terms of supporting a closer relationship, which may include the promotion of research-based practice as well as research-based education as a mutual endeavour. Additionally, such collaboration facilitates dialogues about reciprocal information and knowledge of each other's systems, organisation and practice, which may generate other collaborative projects of benefit to students, academics, practitioners and service users.

When participating in community-based research, public health nurse managers appear to achieve a higher status and an innovative role in terms of being 'door-openers', linking university and community representatives. Additionally, a positive attitude to the use of research results, including knowledge of how to assess findings critically, supports management practice and improves services. When academia participates in community-based research, the faculty and students gain a better understanding of challenges in the practical field, which may encourage reflection and learning as well as a contribution better adapted to developing practice.

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**A commentary by Synnöve Karvinen-Niinikoski appears on the following page**

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### ORIGINAL PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT AND RESEARCH

## Improving public health nursing: an example of community-based research in Norway

Commentary by Synnöve Karvinen-Niinikoski

What would be the gain in educating research-oriented practitioners and promoting research-oriented practice?

There is growing popularity, in almost any field, for the development of partnerships between academia, professional practice, and citizens and service users, with the goal of increasing research based education and practice development. Practical and productive engagement is regarded as important in all research, with the policy emphasis increasingly on gaining external funding and contributing to practice or service innovations on a local and a global scale. This stems from ongoing changes in our living environments, service systems and production structures. An example of this kind of partnership is in Finland, where education policy has led to a groundbreaking university merger, The Aalto University, which aims to create a new science and arts community by bringing together three existing universities of technology, economics and art. This project also aims to encourage other traditional universities towards similar efforts and engagement. All this fits well with the UNESCO and EU higher education and research policies, which are referred as motivational factors for the research approach discussed in this article by Elisabeth Willumsen.

The article on community-based research with an interest in improving public health nursing is, on the one hand, a very timely one, even in general terms. On the other hand, the question of partnership between academia and practice – teaching, researching and practice development, and even user engagement – has long been a core issue in fields such as nursing and social work, particularly in relation to training, relevant research and knowledge production. The split between practice and research, practice and theory has been a persistent feature of academic education and shadowed the disciplinary development in the fields of social care and healthcare. Still, it is impossible even to think of professional education without an intensive practice relationship, which can be considered a classical dilemma for these fields. This has also contributed to the paradigmatic turns in research and knowledge production in social sciences regarding ontological and epistemological issues as well as methodological and practical ones. Research strategies such as community-based research can be seen as an approach to these dilemmas.

Similarly, there is the debate on evidence-based practice, whereby professional practices and interventions in social and healthcare on methods and approaches are legitimised by scientific evidence from rigorous research, namely randomised controlled trials. This kind of approach, however, can be seen to favour the traditional professional knowledge monopoly idea for expertise and will not be adequate for the human professions and services, but matches well the critical testing of certain methods and approaches and thus contributes to the knowledge base. What is needed in these fields are more context-sensitive research strategies and an emphasis on the practitioners – for example, nurses, nurses managers and social workers – and their ability to act as

epistemic subjects and contributors to the knowledge production as well as professional experts using the knowledge for working and making judgments with service users. It is here that the interest in research-mindedness as an aim for professional education comes to the fore.

The project on community-based research in the mother-child health service discussed in this article is a well designed and carefully reported adaptation of a community-based approach. It has a genuine interest in bringing together researcher education, professional practice and practice-based research in order to increase practitioner participation in academic research and bridge the gap between academia and practice. There appear to have been positive experiences affecting both the quality of the research and the overcoming of barriers to collaborative working. For nurse managers becoming participants in the research through all its phases, it was professionally enriching and status strengthening. The student researchers gained a positive experience of practice engagement and contributions to practice development. Also, the idea of meaningful, and even easy, access to practice-relevant scientific knowledge clearly promoted research-mindedness in all the parties. Such projects are welcome and necessary for their clarification of how to promote knowledge-based practices and context-sensitive knowledge production and research. There still seems to be a gap between research and practice, leaving each in its own field, with research still having the prestige to give practice greater status.

Actually, when looking at the need to develop services and professional approaches continuously and flexibly to meet the challenges of welfare and health in our changing world and societies, one is left pondering whether this kind of coming together is enough and implies really a research-oriented professional practitioner ideal. If we really look closely at the nature and epistemological requirements of knowledge production in the fields of public health and social work, then research-orientation among practicing professionals should be seen as an aim of professional education and policy in higher education. This is the line that academic social work education and the paradigm of practice research has developed in Finland. This kind of approach also demands close cooperation between practice and academia and is based on efforts to construct a context where all the necessary elements – practice, research, professional education and service user input – can contribute to the development of knowledge, expertise construction, and practice and services. The effort made in Helsinki consists of two practice research institutes, Heikki Waris and Mathilda Wrede, where the parties mentioned above and policy makers can closely collaborate. This is still at the phase where the ideal model for collaboration is being developed, and a rigorous description of a research project of the scope described here is of major interest in this respect.

I hope that my reflections on this interesting article will open up ideas for further discussions and efforts in creating a new practice-based research culture, and for new thinking in health and social scientific disciplines and education.

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