Growing Research In Practice: The story so far

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Abstract

This article presents an initial account of an innovative programme aimed at raising the profile of practitioner research across a range of social work settings within the Auckland region. It describes a pilot development that grew from initial discussions between members of staff of social work programmes at Massey University (Albany) and the University of Auckland (Faculty of Education) concerning the lack of practitioner research in New Zealand social work. The article briefly considers issues for practitioner research in social work and outlines the 'work in progress' that is the Growing Research in Practice (GRIP) programme.

Background

The nature and quantity of research activity undertaken by social work practitioners has been subject to critical comment for some time. There is longstanding concern that social workers concentrate on the 'prime tasks' working at the front line ahead of developing an empirical basis for their decision making, and developing a body of research on practice outcomes (Munro, 1998). This impacts on the status and credibility of social work as a profession. McCrae et al. (2005), for example, express concern about the weak position of social work in mental health services, due to the lack of research produced, especially in comparison with allied health professions, such as psychiatry. McCrae et al. assert that 'until social work can assert the value of its unique contribution, its impact on policy and practice will remain weak, and the prospects for a more socially based model in integrated services may be undermined' (McCrae et al.: 70). Overseas there have been attempts to develop 'evidence based practice' where data keeping, interpretation, the appraisal of client needs and evaluation were to be integrated into the practice role (Bradbury and Reason, 2003; McNeill, 2006). However, attempts to impose/develop models of evidence-based practice in which 'interventions must be selected and used on the basis of their empirically demonstrated effectiveness' (Mantysaari, 2005: 254) have run into difficulties and criticism. This has been due to both the difficulties in producing such control-oriented knowledge and the tendency for such 'evidence' to overlook local and socio-economic contexts.

There is heated discussion on how far research related activities should become the core business of practice (Webb, 2001, 2002; Sheldon, 2001). In New Zealand Smith (2001) has discussed the nature of the research-practice interface and argued the central importance of research principles to good social work practice. It is not the purpose of this article to survey or review the literature on evidence based practice in any detail, rather our focus is on the relatively low engagement of practitioners in research activities in New Zealand. Our standpoint is that sound social work practice can and should include an orientation towards enquiry (Fook, 1996).

Payne (2005) argues that 'to be ethical, social workers should use knowledge that has been gathered and tested empirically in the most rigorous ways possible to provide evidence of the form of action that is most likely to achieve its objective for the benefit of clients' (p.55). He lists six ways evidence-based practice may be implicated in the mindset of social work practice:
* Using classifications with empirical care and accuracy,
* Being sufficiently research-minded as practitioners to be constantly reading and seeking out research reports to inform practice,
* Empirically testing what works in the range of options that practitioners might use,
* Always setting up evaluative loops, as a feature of programmes, be they process or outcome focused,
* Doing research as part of practice or with the benefit of resources provided in the work-place,
* Having panels that write practice guides based on the research findings that are gleaned from published material so that practitioners transfer the knowledge into everyday practice (Payne, 2005: 55-6).

Each of Payne's perspectives embedded in the 'mind' of social work brings the occupation that much closer to a research-savvy (meaning respectable and credible) profession. At no point should this lead to the practitioner losing sight of the fact that the profession is based on the right to social justice for all. Critical enquiry can facilitate social workers to utilise knowledge gained from practice to advocate for service improvements and the removal of barriers to full economic and social participation.

The trend for social work to improve research-mindedness – to foster the uptake and utilisation of research – has been noted in many contexts. Research-mindedness is a term increasingly used to describe a set of necessary attributes for all practitioners, which includes the following essential elements: the faculty for critical reflection informed by knowledge and research; the ability to use research to inform practice which is consistent with core social work values and a counter to unfair discrimination, racism, poverty, disadvantage and injustice; and lastly an understanding of the process of research and the use of research to theorise from practice (Harrison and Humphreys, 1997).

Karniven-Niinikovski (2005) identifies recent rapid developments in attitudes towards the purpose and nature of social work research. There is currently a 'shift from acquisition and transmission of knowledge to construction and invention of knowledge, towards in-novative knowledge production' (p.262). Karniven-Niinikovski suggests a move away from the emphasis on research education as a means of giving social work a more professional image towards a more reflexive practitioner-based enquiry. For this to occur, she discusses

a need to find 'models of collaborative and innovative knowledge production and learning allowing the search for alternative methods of action and innovation' (p. 262).

This theme, which promotes research-mindedness as an expression of reflexive practice rather than linked to attempts to promote the status of the profession, is echoed by Gilgun (2005) who notes that social workers take into practice situations not just theoretical knowledge and information gained from research but practice wisdom, knowledge gained from what we have learned from our clients, and lastly perspective gained from our own personal experience (Gilgun 2005: 59). It is thus a logical next step that practitioners might seek to elaborate their practice wisdom, explore best practice and evaluate practice innovation. It seems likely that New Zealand practitioners would echo the findings of the United Kingdom 2004 review of the use of research in social care, 'that social care practitioners and managers feel that research is often producer driven and distant from their own local needs' (Walters et al, 2004, p.19). In a similar vein Dirkx (2006) criticises the 'what works' school of thought, which sees 'research on practice' as being conducted by academics, but can 'marginalise local knowledge generated and constructed by or with practitioners' (p.275). Dirkx describes the 'insider' view versus the 'outsider perspective reflected in evidence based research' (p.276), regarding 'insider research' as being able to use traditional research methods to examine what works, but from a perspective which takes into account the epistemological, moral and political complexities of practice' (p.276).

A key aim of the Growing Research in Practice (GRIP) programme is to reduce the distance between practitioners and academics and reduce marginalisation through encouraging frontline practitioners' critical inquiry via collaboration with experienced researchers.

Christa Fouché and Neil Lunt from the School of Social and Cultural Studies at Massey University had identified low levels of social work research activity as a focus for development during 2003. A series of workshops were organised in April and May 2004 at Massey University (Albany) and funded by the Social Policy Evaluation and Research Committee, Ministry of Social Development (SPEaR). These workshops sought to highlight issues around research, evidence and practice for social workers and agencies. The events were designed to develop a dialogue on research in practice and establish networks involving social work professionals, educators and researchers. The workshops led to the creation of the Evidence (North) e-newsletter aimed at fostering information sharing and discussion around research, social work and social services within the Auckland region.

Key messages that emerged from the workshops included:
- The low research base that exists in New Zealand across a range of fields of practice (level);
- The lack of confidence practitioners had in undertaking and making use of research (confidence);
- The interest practitioners expressed in hearing more about small-scale practitioner research (commitment);
- A broader gap in theoretical understanding around how practitioners make use of research findings and incorporate 'evidence' into their work and decision making (uptake);
- That any initiative be proactive given the constraints practitioners faced in terms of time, resources and skills (partnership/collaboration).

These considerations: level, confidence, commitment, uptake and partnership have helped to shape the ideas that underpin the GRIP programme. Discussion of these issues led to the instigation of an initiative based around the provision of a series of supported practice-based projects focused on building practitioner capacity and capability. These supported projects would enable practitioners to be involved in conceptualising, undertaking and disseminating research. Joubert (2006) notes that social worker interest in practice based research is high but a lack of knowledge and confidence forms a considerable barrier to participation (Joubert, 2006: 157).

What is GRIP?

Aims

The overarching goal of the GRIP programme is to assist the development of a culture of practitioner enquiry in social service agencies in Auckland, aimed at facilitating meaningful change and service improvement. It is a collaborative programme bringing together practitioners, academics, agencies and funding bodies.

The objective of the GRIP team's own enquiry is to develop an understanding of 'what works' in facilitating the uptake of research and results amongst social work practitioners within organisations and in practice settings. The programme encompasses four distinct but inter-related components. Driven by a team consisting of the Massey University and University of Auckland partners and a practitioner advisor, and logistically managed by a programme manager, the outcomes envisaged by this initiative are:

- Practice projects involving groups of practitioners in conceptualising, undertaking and disseminating research.
- A practice research resource manual compiled from the material utilised to mentor the practice projects.
- A report on the process (subsequently referred to as the Knowledge Map) that will contribute to a greater understanding of what facilitates and enables practitioners to take up research in practice settings; and what works in the development of collaborative and practice-focused inquiry.
- A practice-research symposium hosted to share experiences and disseminate information.

Figure one illustrates the components and relationships in the GRIP programme.

Part of the scoping of the programme required the GRIP team to set parameters for the projects. The authors wanted to locate the projects clearly in the participants' workplaces and ideally in teams. GRIP does not involve individual projects. It was not intended that the projects would form part of the requirements for academic qualifications. GRIP did not intend to support multi-year projects, nor involve the direct supervision and participation of academics in the research procedures chosen by the participants. Responsibility for such matters as ethics approval lay with the participating agencies.

Through the Knowledge Map component of the programme we intended to go some way towards addressing the research-practice gap, exploring what happens during the life of the workshop series, the practice projects and in the period following their completion.

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Funding

Massey University obtained financial support from a number of organisations who together constitute a consortium of 'investors'. These funding agencies include the Families Commission's Innovative Practice Fund, the Ministry of Social Development SPEaR Linkages fund and the ASB Trusts in partnership with the ANZASW. The University of Auckland obtained additional internal research funds to support the data collection and analysis for the Knowledge Map part of the programme (to be reported in due course).

The projects are largely self-funded and project proposers needed to ensure that they had support from their managers to undertake the projects. A small contestable fund is available to cover minor incidental costs not able to be met through the practitioners' workplaces.

Management

The programme manager, appointed in January 2006 for the duration of the programme, is responsible for overall management and progress of the programme as well as having a research role. The GRIP team meets frequently in order to manage both the support provided to the practice project teams as well as the collection and analysis of data for the Knowledge Map. Decisions about planning of events and the other outcomes, reviewing the direction and progress of the practitioner projects and attending to ethical and organisational matters are arrived at through discussion and consensus.

In an effort to develop a robust process, the GRIP team recruited the services of a 'critical friend' to question and challenge group dynamic, ethics and processes. Varying descriptions of the role of critical friend identify traits of trustworthiness, ability to ask provocative questions and capacity to offer a friendly critique (Costa and Kallick, 1993; Kember, et al., 1996). As a practitioner who has experienced the journey of research in the workplace, our 'critical friend' provides a practitioner voice, promotes a reality-based perspective; consistently grounding practitioner projects within participants' research contexts and validating the ability of the GRIP team to enhance the capacity of all participants in the programme.

Getting started

In February 2006, practitioners from a broad range of social service agencies across greater Auckland attended the first of six funded workshops and were invited to consider and propose modest-scale research relevant to their practice. A timeline for the programme required groups to consider a project that would be carried out over the year April 2006 to March 2007.

Expressions of interest were sought from interested groups and required that they demonstrate that the proposed project had the following features:

- A project from, within and for practice,
- A small keen group of practitioners, staff or consumers,
- A small-scale feasible topic,
- A client or service-delivery focus,
- Sufficient support from within the agency,
- The potential for GRIP to add value.

While the organisers hoped to inspire six such projects, the response was overwhelming, with 18 expressions of interest submitted. From this, nine were chosen as best fitting the parameters of GRIP.

The practice projects

At the time of writing eight practice projects were still underway within the Auckland region across a range of fields of practice and types of agency. A major initial focus was to help groups shape their research questions and consider how their questions might be answerable through a range of approaches. For example, methods of inquiry might include:

- Critical review of the literature and evidence (nationally and internationally).
- Utilising existing data within the agency (data mining).
- Collecting new empirical material.
- The use of documentary material to support professional decisions.
- The description and assessment of intervention logic, practice decisions and policies.
- The description and summary of client characteristics.
- The collection of responses from service users and other professionals.
- The identification of concepts and vocabulary that social workers utilise in their interactions with service users.

We could not determine the questions in advance – such decisions were taken in collaboration within each individual agency, by practitioners according to their needs and aspirations. Groups also needed to undertake their own activities to seek support and approval of their projects within their employing organisations.

Sound practitioner research is congruent with social work values (Powell, 2005). Basic social work principles informed the projects:

• Transparency
• Reciprocity
• Social sensitivity
• Empowerment and social change
• Multiple accountability
• Treaty partnership.

Within the operation of each practice project, full space has been afforded for appropriate cultural methodologies and ways of working. For example, a demonstration model undertaken with an iwi agency or Pacific service provider would require the development of culturally appropriate approaches and resources would need to be sought to provide guidance and support. The projects are controlled, negotiated and staffed by those with appropriate cultural knowledge and service expertise. Throughout this period we have sought to include experts with knowledge of kaupapa Maori methodologies, Pacific ways of working such as Fa'asamoa, cross-cultural working and work with vulnerable groups.

Outline of the projects
The studies emanate from a wide range of agencies, including local District Health Board units, a wide variety of NGOs, and a branch of the Council of Social Services. The practitioners involved are predominantly social and community workers, but there are also therapists, counsellors and psychologists. At the beginning of the programme in an 'icebreaker' exercise, practitioners located their own research experience on a continuum from almost nil, to extensive for those with considerable postgraduate research experience.

While all the projects are ultimately about improving services to clients, there have been a range of approaches to this issue. While some are looking at evaluating a programme or tool, others are looking more closely at aspects of social work activity in the agency and ways of improving it. Two are investigating issues of low uptake of programmes and one is taking first steps in a broad-based needs assessment.

A range of methodologies are also being employed. Quantitative methods include 'data-mining' of client files and a survey questionnaire of community agencies. A number of projects are using individual and group interviews to gather qualitative data, some of staff or other agencies and some of clients and client families. All have undertaken literature reviews, though of varying depth, depending on the topic and context. Access to literature has varied: some team members are enrolled as students at a tertiary institution, others have access through employer/university partnership arrangements and others have found local libraries and the internet invaluable also. Table One provides a summary of key features of the projects that were selected.

Table One. Research projects selected for participation in GRIP in March 2006.

Description of agency	Goal/Topic of the research	Methodology
Community health agency working with women	Evaluating the impact on staff of a screening tool currently in use	Data snapshots Focus groups with staff
Community mental health support programme with Chinese consumers	Evaluating effectiveness of a non-Chinese programme used with Chinese NZ consumers	Interviews and focus groups with consumers, their families and mental health professionals
Community social service with Maori families	Developing their evaluation process	Focus groups with consumer group i.e. whanau
Early parenting support programme to Pacific families	Seeking to create a consistent social work model for Pacific practitioners	Interviews and focus groups with staff
Hospital social workers	Developing a best-practice social work model within family meetings	Focus groups amongst social workers and other hospital staff
Community agency working with male offenders	Investigating the reasons for non-engagement and non-completion of programmes	Data mining from files
Domestic violence agency working with migrants	Investigating participation by male clients in domestic violence programmes elsewhere	Interviewing staff at agencies successfully recruiting men to domestic violence programmes
Council of social services	A stock-take of social services to assess need in the broad area covered	A questionnaire sent to agencies covering a broad range of social services
Two youth services	Investigating the effectiveness of goal-setting as a tool for working with young people	Focus groups and interviews with participants in programmes and educational advisors

The workshops

The six workshops allow broad cover of the research process and some of the more significant issues. Table Two summarises of the focus of the workshop series. The huge disparity in research knowledge and skills amongst participants and different rates of progress through the research makes it impossible to cater to all at all times. Instead, the workshops are seen as an opportunity to increase general research knowledge and inform research activity where possible, to meet and share experiences with other participants and to discuss some of the issues that arise during the research. The second workshop drew the selected projects' teams together and began the process of developing a research question. Participants explored the potential focus of their enquiry and considered where and how they could obtain data. Information on literature search and synthesis was provided and participants were encouraged to pool their resources.

Other workshops have addressed the various stages of the research process, ethics and the cultural and organisational challenges of social service research. Expert speakers have contributed to participant understanding of methodologies, data collection, data analysis, presentation of results and cultural expertise. Feedback from the workshops has been very positive throughout.

Table Two. Focus of the workshop series.

Workshop	Topic	Activities
1	Introduction to GRIP • Call for expressions of interest	• Presentations • Brainstorms • Beginning to formulate expressions of interest
2	Getting Started: • Refining the Research Question • Using the literature • Thinking through the ethical issues • Thinking about methodology • Allocation of mentors	• Further information on GRIP to the selected groups • Presentations by GRIP team members • Mapping out the next tasks
3	Designing Methodologies • Introduction • Interviews and focus groups • Surveys – old and new data • Panel discussion • Journalling as reflection	• Three guest speakers discussing a range of methodologies and cultural issues • More on the GRIP team's own enquiry • Course on search engines at Massey Library • Donation of books by Thomson Publishing
4	Data Collection and Analysis of Diverse Perspectives • Responding to difference • Pasifika research guidelines	• Two guest speakers on Pasifika and migrant research and panel discussion • One hour World Café discussion – mixing and moving the groups • Time in own groups • Enabling research in the workplace: World Café discussion
5	Analysing and Organising Data • Quantitative methods • Qualitative methods • Planning to March and beyond	• Two guest speakers covering qualitative and quantitative data analysis • 'Workshopping' the topic • Planning in whole group and own groups
6	Writing and Presenting Findings and/or Progress	• Two guest speakers discussing ways to write research reports and present research findings • Planning for the symposium and thinking about terminating GRIP
Symposium	Celebrating a Gripping Year	• Keynote speakers on practitioner research • Presentations from each of the groups and the GRIP team • Contemplating future possibilities

A collaborative approach has been utilised throughout, based on an underlying belief that all participants in GRIP would bring experience that could contribute to the whole. GRIP participants have inherent knowledge and wisdom which emerges in a strengths-based process. Incorporating proactive initiatives within the workshops' programmes was reflective of the evolving collaborative partnership. As an organised group, the philosophy that underpins the GRIP programme parallels that of 'Appreciative Inquiry' (Cooperrider and

Whitney, 1999) where 'the cooperative search for the best in people, the organisations and the world around them involves the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capability to heighten positive potential' (1999: 10). Appreciative Inquiry as a practice-oriented intervention underpinned the utilisation of proactive initiatives as in the case of 'The World Café' (Brown and Isaacs, 2005). The use of the World Café model (Brown and Isaacs, 2005) in the fourth workshop was designed to encourage a more participatory community of contribution and connection, by facilitating 'a conversations that mattered' with all participants about strategies for enabling research in the workplace. Discussion was lively and largely positive, though constraints and difficulties were acknowledged. The participants' experience will be reported in detail in a future report.

Using focused questions within a café-style context generated dynamic conversations and produced outcomes that identified participants as becoming more comfortable within their role as researcher-in-practice. World Café was designed to motivate by validating the participants' experiences. As an experiential exercise, the participants enjoyed scholarly dialogue and the sharing of emerging new knowledge. This encouraged a collective team vision of promoting research as a practice investment. Participants shared the strategies that were helping them to make progress with their projects in stretched practice environments.

Mentoring
Mentoring forms a significant part of the GRIP programme. At the second workshop, mentors were assigned to the teams. The mentors are the GRIP research team members (with the exception of the critical friend) and a Maori cultural advisor. Mentors have met regularly with the teams in the workplace and e-mail has been used to communicate ideas and drafts throughout. Mentoring is provided on a pro bono basis. The role is supportive, rather than supervisory, and responsive to the queries or concerns raised by the practitioners. Mentors have encouraged the teams to create a timeline for their project, assign tasks within and set goals for small components to be completed.

When research projects require the collection of new empirical data, the mentors have assisted in conceptualising research questions and approaches, with a particular emphasis on planning, developing and managing timelines, methods, sample size and feasibility, and most importantly questions of research ethics.

The Knowledge Map
Little is known about the direct/indirect impact of small-scale studies on organisations, fields of practice, colleagues and practitioner-researchers themselves. Through the 'Knowledge Map' component of the programme the authors intend to go some way towards addressing this gap, exploring what happens during the life of the practice projects and in the period following their completion.

The Knowledge Map process includes the gathering and recording of information from the project participants at various points (before, during and following the completion of the practice projects). It addresses questions related to:

• Perceptions about research and knowledge dissemination;
• Obstacles to be negotiated to undertake research;

- The perceived impact of the GRIP programme over a period of time; and
- The influence of this exercise on workplace research culture.

To this end, at each workshop project participants have been asked to complete questionnaires to provide a record of their experiences over time.

In the period September – November 2006 additional ethics approval and funding were obtained via the University of Auckland to commence a series of participant interviews to enhance the Knowledge Map. This current initiative will contribute knowledge concerning the impact of the provision of support and mentoring to practitioners in a social work practice context and thus better inform the practice of practitioner research. This component of the GRIP programme aims to assess GRIP participants' perspectives on the strategies and resources employed during the GRIP programme in order to strengthen our understanding of practitioner research in social work in Auckland.

Interviews with team leaders and project teams were being conducted during the latter part of 2006 and early 2007 to provide further data. Interrelated questions include: to what extent is a research culture facilitated within the organisation; are there changes to practice and service delivery; what other direct/indirect differences does a practice project make? Collecting data across the projects will allow models of research impact to be developed. It is crucial to explore this little understood area and generate knowledge that can be fed back into social work pedagogy and research designs. The point is not to unify but rather to understand a range of approaches and to provide greater opportunities for understanding, learning, sharing experience and ideas, and initiating action. Data analysis of the completed interviews is underway.

From early on in the GRIP programme, the GRIP team themselves were keen to capture their own experiences, reflections and learning from engagement with this process. To this end, all team members have made a commitment to record their reflections on the mentoring sessions, make notes during workshops and make research memos to note insights and questions. Many GRIP team discussions have been recorded and transcribed to add to the rich set of data available to the Knowledge Map process.

The future

Each team will present their findings or a particular aspect of their research journey at the symposium and where possible as part of a collection of symposium proceedings. A resource manual (a collation of resources and ideas from the GRIP programme) and a final report of the GRIP journey will be completed by the end of June 2007.

GRIP in its current form has only ever been intended as an 18-month programme of enquiry and facilitation. It is hoped that it will contribute to an emerging culture of practitioner research. Ideally it will provide both a catalyst for further practitioner projects and a contribution to the knowledge base for social work research. Dissemination of the findings of the demonstration projects, and ongoing analysis and contextualising of the material collected as the process has unfolded will be important and effort will be made to present and publish this material and encourage practice teams to share their work. The focus is

always on the ultimate goal of improving the service social workers and their organisations deliver to some of New Zealand's most disadvantaged citizens.

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