

3. Reflections on the Impact of the Evidence-Based Practice Approach in Denmark on Politics, Research, the Trade Union, and Social Work Practice

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Abstract

This article provides insight into how evidence-based thinking has influenced the social policy context and social work research in Denmark and the debate about evidence-based practice in the trade union for Danish social pedagogues and practitioners. The article examines how these different agents understand and define evidence-based practice and research. One of the main conclusions is that the evidence-based approach has not had a significant impact on social work practice and research in Denmark, and the article reflects on different reasons for this phenomenon.

3.1 Introduction

Evidence-based research and practice in Denmark has been the subject of discussions among policy makers, researchers, and practitioners since the passing of the millennium. At this point in time, discussions about methods have moved beyond academic circles and become a topic of discussion in politics and unions as well (Rieper & Hansen, 2007). The discussions reflect increasing societal demands that social interventions should be based on systematic, outcome-oriented, and evidence-based methods.

Evidence-based practice and research on intervention effects represent a new paradigm (Sommerfeld, 2005; Ziegler, 2005), which also has implications for social work in the Danish public sector. Evidence-based effect research is, among other things, a part of the "what works" agenda, which aims to create a

new form of knowledge about what works in practice (Moos, Krejsler, Hjort, Laursen, & Braad, 2006; Sommerfeld, 2005; Ziegler, 2005).

The aim of this article is to provide insight into the Danish conditions in this area by exploring evidence-based thinking in a social policy context, in a Danish social work research context, and in the debate in the trade union for Danish social pedagogues and practitioners. How do the various agents understand and define evidence-based practice and research? I will focus on child and youth issues and the segment of social work in Denmark characterized as social pedagogy.

3.2 Policy: The National Board of Social Services

Since 2004, the National Board of Social Services (Socialstyrelsen) has tried to introduce evidence-based practice programs in the social arena by contributing special state grants (*Satspuljemidler*) to municipalities and public and private institutions for the implementation of special programs. This mainly concerns the following six programs:

- The Incredible Years, which consists of programs for parents and children and one program for social workers in schools and kindergartens. The programs are group based and the methods are video modeling, role-play, practical activities, and group conversations.
- Parent Management Training–Oregon (PMTO), which is a parent-focused program with the purpose of providing tools to families to generate more positive interactions. The treatment method is focused on children from the ages of 4 to 12 who have behavioral problems. PMTO is evidence based and research has shown that both children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and parents with similar problems benefit highly from the program.
- Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care (MTFC), which is a holistic treatment program focused on children and adolescents between the ages of 12 and 18 with behavioral problems. MTFC is designed to improve outcomes among young people in foster care who exhibit challenging behavior. MTFC includes temporary placement in a training family, where

the treatment and training take place. The treatment includes a MTFC team, the training family, the biological family, and the child or adolescent.

- Multisystematic Therapy (MST), which is a treatment offered to young people between 12 and 17 years old with severe behavioral problems. MST includes both the parents and the social network of the young person. Therefore, the parents have a central role in the treatment, which takes place in the young person's home.
- MultifunC, which is a treatment program in Norway offered to young people between the ages of 14 and 18 with severe behavioral problems. The program includes a temporary institutional placement combined with inclusion of the family in the treatment process. It also features an aftercare program for young people. The first Danish MultifunC institution opened in 2011.
- Aggression Replacement Training (ART), which is a method designed for children and young people between the ages of 4 and 20. The purpose is to help the child or young person develop new attitudes, better social skills, and alternative behavioral patterns. ART focuses on enhancing social skills and abilities for moral reflection and empathy.

These programs are characterized by being partly parent oriented and partly focusing on treatment of inappropriate behavior. Socialstyrelsen has defined evidence-based programs as methods that have a documented effect (Worregård, 2012). The implementation of these evidence-based programs is the subject of top-down control.

3.3 Research

Since 2002, the Nordic Campbell Centre has been the leading provider of evidence-based research reviews in political welfare, and researchers who support the evidence-based approach to social work research are mainly involved with this institution. There is an extreme shortage of research in this area in Denmark. The only example is a research center on children established in 2013 by a private foundation. Nevertheless, there has been a heated debate about evidence in Danish research. This discussion about

research methods will be further described, but first the Nordic Campbell Centre and the TrygFondens Centre for Child Research are described.

3.3.1 Nordic Campbell Centre

Created in 2002 as a part of the international Campbell Cooperation, the Nordic Campbell Centre collects all research-based knowledge about the effects of social programs. The purpose is to communicate this knowledge to social workers, consultants, and decision makers in the social arena throughout Scandinavia. The center is financed by the Danish state budget and was initially supported through 2005.

According to Hansen and Rieper (2010), various Nordic scientists were involved in the creation of both Cochrane and Campbell centers in Scandinavia, and the Nordic Campbell Centre established a base in Denmark very fast. The center, now called SFI Campbell, is located at the Danish National Centre for Social Research. Evidence-based thinking quickly traveled to the Nordic countries, which according to Hansen and Rieper (2010) was made possible because of an existing international research network. From the beginning, researchers from the Nordic countries were involved in discussions about the development of the international partnership and were successful in securing support and gathering resources for the establishment of the Nordic centers in Denmark.

At that time, as a professor of social work at Columbia University, Edward J. Mullen played a crucial role in the establishment of the Nordic Campbell Centre and was in dialog with Nordic scientists. Furthermore, he was a member of the Nordic Campbell Centre Methods Network from 2004 to 2010. Since 2000, Mullen had been a member of Campbell Collaboration's Social Welfare Executive and Advisory Committee. Mullen's many publications have been an inspiration to the Nordic scientists and appeared in Nordic journals (e.g., Mullen, 2002), and he also wrote articles with Nordic scientists (Cheetham, Mullen, Soydan, & Tengvald, 1998).

The hierarchy of evidence was employed during the initial phase of the Nordic Campbell Centre's existence to categorize knowledge and research methods according to validity and reliability. Evidence-based knowledge has the highest validity. It presupposes research methods, which can produce knowledge about effects and what works that is isolated from other aspects or factors that can affect both process and outcome. An example of this is the randomized controlled trial (RCT). Involvement and participation of users in research is considered lowest in the hierarchy. This appears in the following overview (Rieper & Hansen, 2007), which will be further discussed in relation to the debate about evidence among scientists.

Level	Type of Study
1	Systematic reviews of RCTs Single RCTs of good quality Controlled but not randomized trails
2	Systematic reviews of controlled trails Single controlled trails Bad RCTs
3	Systematic reviews of case-control studies Single case-control studies
4	Case series Cohort studies Case-control studies of bad quality
5	Expert evaluations, consensus conferences, qualitative designs, etc.

For several years, the hierarchy of evidence was available on the Nordic Campbell Centre's homepage, but it disappeared after a period, probably due to its transformation to SFI Campbell. Mette Deding, the head of SFI Campbell, described the foundation of the center as follows, translated from Danish:

In SFI Campbell, we work to gather knowledge about the effects of interventions in the area of welfare policy. In these years, there is a strong focus on effects and evidence-based policies and practices, and in doing so, we contribute to gathering knowledge from international research. Our goal with this is to contribute to the Danish debate on interventions that have proven to be powerful internationally, so that this experience can be used in Danish decision making. More specifically, we do this by developing systematic reviews using the Campbell method in the broad area of welfare policy. A Campbell review is a systematic review that summarizes the results of all studies that measure the effects of interventions on welfare policy. The Campbell research review seeks to answer the question of the effect in relation to a specific type of effort; Does the effort work as intended, how much, and for whom? These are very specific questions that are methodologically difficult to answer, and therefore it is a laborious process to prepare a research review. We emphasize that professionalism and systematics must be top notch before one can afford to draw generalized conclusions about the effect of a given action. (Deding, 2011, p. 16)

The focus of SFI Campbell is on the effects of interventions, and systematic reviews represent the means to gain knowledge about these effects. As subsequently described, the Nordic Campbell Centre and SFI Campbell have not had an extensive influence on the way of thinking and practices of Danish social workers. In the social policy debate in Denmark, the Campbell Centre's systematic reviews have been highlighted by Socialstyrelsen to introduce evidence-based programs, but this strategy has been criticized by both social work researchers and practitioners (Høybye-Mortensen, 2013). Thus, systematic reviews from the Campbell Collaboration have not influenced the development or debate among practitioners on a large scale.

In cooperation with the Danish National Centre for Social Research, SFI Campbell has started developing RCTs in connection with the measurement of social initiatives, but to date there are no published results from these efforts and there are no other research projects in Denmark based on controlled trials. However, in 2013 a center was established in Denmark that generates so-called "systematic evaluations" of social initiatives.

3.3.2 TrygFondens Centre for Child Research

Along with a wide range of other scientists and coworkers, Michael Rosholm, a professor at Aarhus University, is now implementing research on different ages, stages of development, and skills of very young children in daycare centers in secondary education and early adulthood. The TrygFondens Center for Child Research was preliminarily established with a grant of 60 million Danish Krone (DKK) for the years 2013 to 2018, and there are further indications of additional funding of 40 million DKK. The research center focuses on the systematic measurement of the effect of social interventions.

The research center aims to contribute to breaking the cycle of disadvantage for groups of children in Denmark. According to Gurli Martinussen, the director of the TrygFondens center, researchers are seeking to improve the well-being of a large group of children and young people in the Danish society:

By strengthening effect research on children and young people, we can make a difference for vulnerable children by giving them a better chance to break the cycle of disadvantage. This gives them a better life, and it will benefit the entire community. (TrygFonden, n.d., para. 12).

This Danish research project also prefers so-called "systematic evaluations of social interventions" and can be characterized as evidence-based research in the area of children and young people, but this is a rather isolated case.

3.3.3 The Debate about Evidence-Based Research among Scientists

The debate in Denmark has primarily concerned the tendency in the evidence-based tradition to focus on the relationship between intervention and effect, leaving the processes or mechanisms that connect them unclarified (Bryderup, 2005b; Frørup, 2011; Kristensen & Hybel, 2006; Olesen, 2007; Rieper & Hansen, 2007). Some of these discussions involved Shaw (2005), who outlined the construction of evaluation models and emphasized the shortcomings related to evidence-based thinking, which does not originate in daily social work

practices, experiences, and explanations. According to Shaw (2005), the abstract and context-independent evaluation framework loses its importance in the context of daily practice.

Rieper and Hansen (2007) and Olesen (2007) highlighted the limitations of what they called *narrow evidence*. Narrow evidence refers to methods that focus exclusively on effectiveness and efficiency, and not on why something works or does not work and how the user experiences an intervention. This evidence operates with given criteria of success, which can be assumed to be in opposition to individualized service. Rieper and Hansen (2007) and other Danish scientists have argued that there is a need for a broader understanding of evidence and a more comprehensive approach to investigating social work practice, involving not only quantitative research and RCTs.

In this regard, Rieper and Hansen (2007) criticized the hierarchy that evidence-based thinking imposes on various forms of knowledge. According to the Nordic Campbell Centre, this is described as an evidence hierarchy, which is a hierarchy of methods to measure the effect of an intervention. The evidence hierarchy can be considered as a vertical categorization of knowledge. Thus, effect studies are assumed to produce evidence-based knowledge of high validity, which can be used to clarify and describe the interventions and goals unambiguously and isolated from other aspects or factors that may have affected the process and outcome (for example, RCTs; see the evidence hierarchy in the previous table).

Such a hierarchy of knowledge represents a positivist orientation and a technical, instrumental view of professions. This criticism concerns the fact that the focus on effects of interventions simplifies the question of knowledge and excludes everyday activity. According to Rieper and Hansen (2007), Kristensen and Hybel (2006), Bryderup (2005b), Egelund (2011), and Høgsbro (2011), this can contribute to an inexpedient reduction of complexity in understanding social work practice.

Effect studies can provide insight into how a particular method works, but they only provide indirect knowledge about what is best and no insight into how interventions can be improved (Bryderup, 2005b). In this context, social work is described as a black box because of a lack of focus on processes and developing factors, including the complexity of social work (Kristensen & Hybel, 2006).

Thus, criticism of the evidence-based approach among social work researchers has focused partly on the evidence hierarchy and partly on the reduction it entails once social work research primarily focuses on the outcome of interventions. The debate among the social work trade union and practitioners has a wider focus and involves other agendas.

3.4 The Trade Union and Practice

From 2005 to 2006, there was a great debate about evidence in the Danish union's journal for social pedagogues in the form of articles and discussion papers with different opinions formulated by both the union and members and practitioners.¹ The debate referred to both concrete discussions about evidence-based knowledge and documentation, but also arguments and discrepancies in a more general matter.

The debate gained momentum after a social work manager contributed to a discussion paper on evidence and welfare in the magazine *Mandag Morgen* (Rasmussen, 2004). He expressed a positive opinion regarding evidence-based interventions in the work of social pedagogues, thus placing evidence-based knowledge on the agenda in the area of social pedagogy. Anna Kathrine Frørup (2011) analyzed this debate in her doctoral dissertation, in which she generally summarized it as a disagreement about how social pedagogy should document its interventions and be understood as a profession.

1 See <http://www.socialpaedagogen.dk/Temaer.aspx>

According to Frørup (2011), the debate shows that there is significant distance between the practitioner's perception of social pedagogy and the perception of the professional managers of the union, who consider the evidence-based approach as a way to gain professional status. There is a huge difference between evidence-based thinking and the thinking that underlies social pedagogical work. There is, according to Frørup (2011), an ongoing fight about the power to define what social pedagogical work should be. In this debate, practitioners are seeking to keep social pedagogy rooted in relational and care-oriented values. According to Frørup (2011), the gap between the parties for and against evidence-based practice and research can be understood as stagnated. On one side is the perception that social pedagogues should make visible and document the effects of their work and that evidence-based practice can have a positive impact on the development of the profession and its status. On the other side of the gap, social pedagogical work is understood as based on more traditional values associated with relationships with citizens or clients.

Based on a combination of her experiences as a social worker and her academic and research-based knowledge, Stefansen (2008) presented her perspective on some of the difficulties and resistance that methods of documentation, including the evidence-based approach, have been met with in the practice field. According to her, the requirements for documentation are considered to be far from practice and the so-called humanistic view of human nature on which the social pedagogical profession is based.

Thus, this discussion springs from different values, attitudes, or discourses. Hjort (2001) distinguished between a political neoliberal discourse and a conservative discourse. According to Hjort (2001), the conservative discourse contains a defense of "traditional academic and professional qualities and existing working conditions" (p. 73). The entire discussion about evidence-based practice seems to enter into this relationship between evidence supporters within a neoliberal discourse and evidence opponents who adhere to a conservative discourse.

Frørup's (2011) research has shown that from 2005 to 2008, the word *evidence* began slipping out of the language in the debate among practitioners. The concept of evidence has been replaced by the concept of knowledge, and in 2008 the concept of knowledge could clearly be observed as the ongoing reference term. According to Frørup (2011), knowledge in this context is described as something that exists and must be discovered through documentation. She stressed that the concept of knowledge carries with it a different meaning. Whereas evidence is about proving and producing results, which are regarded as new and solid knowledge about professional interventions and outcomes, the concept of knowledge focuses inward against the professional core, down toward the foundation of the profession, or both. According to Frørup (2011), this appeals more to a focus on the knowledge that social pedagogues already have and gives them a chance to gather their knowledge to share and accumulate it.

She concluded with a reference to research describing a Danish institutionalized introversion (Bryderup, 2005a) that social pedagogues are not influenced by national debates or international trends regarding evidence (Frørup, 2011).

Furthermore, she concluded that the concept of evidence and evidence-based practice, which was intended to attribute enhanced status to the profession, did not inwardly affect the profession and will not be verified as a matter of course in the social pedagogical way of thinking and practice. Although the supporters of evidence speak strongly and convincingly on the subject, she argued that social pedagogues will not be dominated by the evidence paradigm (Frørup, 2011).

Thus, the debate between the trade union and the practitioners can be seen as a struggle to define the social pedagogical profession and the extent to which evidence-based practice should be used in relation to social pedagogical practice. Evidence-based practice is understood as intrusive, whereas knowledge in a broader sense is seen as more appropriate for the development of social pedagogical work. There is also more indirect talk

about resistance against the evidence hierarchy of knowledge as a strategy to research outcomes and the effects of interventions.

3.5 Conclusions and Reflections

As mentioned, the hierarchy of evidence disappeared from the Nordic Campbell Centre and SFI Campbell's website during the 2000s. Together with the central focus on effects of interventions, this kind of science hierarchy of the evidence-based research approach has been the most central target of critiques by Danish social work researchers.

This criticism is, as previously explained, also part of an international discussion. It has led to the following formulation from one of the foremost supporters of the evidence-based research approach, Professor Edward J. Mullen, in one of his recent articles titled "Reconsidering the 'Idea' of Evidence in Evidence-Based Policy and Practice":

Evidence-based policy and practice (EBP) has become an important social work conceptual framework. Yet, the core EBP concept, the concept of *evidence*, remains ill-defined. I propose a modification of the concept of *evidence* as applied to EBP effectiveness questions. As a basis for this reformulation ideas about *evidence* are examined from cross-disciplinary and multidisciplinary perspectives including epistemology, philosophy of science, evidence-science, and law. I propose that for EBP effectiveness questions: (1) to be considered 'relevant evidence' an explanatory connection between an intervention and an outcome must be established rather than a mere association; (2) the EBP definition of 'best available evidence' should include total available evidence (rather than a subset) about effectiveness, causal roles (i.e., mechanisms), and support factors and be inclusive of high-quality experimental and observational studies as well as high-quality mechanistic reasoning; (3) the familiar five-step EBP process should be expanded to include formulation of warranted, evidence-based arguments and that evidence appraisal be guided by three high level criteria of *relevance*, *credibility*, and *strength* rather than rigid evidence hierarchies; (4) comparative effectiveness research strategies, especially pragmatic controlled studies, hold promise for providing relevant and

actionable evidence needed for policy and practice decision-making and successful implementation. (Mullen, 2015, p. 1)

Evidence-based practice and research, as previously explained, have not received significant acknowledgment in Denmark, and there may be many different reasons for this. The Danish discussion can also be characterized by a very broad conception of evidence-based practice and research with different agendas: effects, what works, economy, legitimacy, documentation, political ideology, research methods, etc.

The opposition to evidence-based practice and top-down management probably should be viewed in the light of a long Danish social pedagogical tradition of not following today's international currents or politics from the Ministry of Social Affairs (Bryderup, 2008). This is linked to a long Danish tradition of philanthropy—not allowing the state to interfere with methods or approaches (Bryderup, 2005a).

In Denmark and the other Nordic countries, there have been extensive and intense debates about research methods in relation to a critique of the positivistic tradition of the 1970s and 1980s. Part of this debate is repeated in the criticism of the hierarchy of knowledge, particularly regarding the notion of the superiority of quantitative methods.

One approach to resolve this debate could be, in the words of Edward J. Mullen (2015), a reformulation of the concept of evidence "examined from cross-disciplinary and multidisciplinary perspectives including epistemology, philosophy of science, evidence-science, and law" (p. 1).

This strategy of involving several different research methods would avoid reducing social work's complexity and be clearly in line with the Danish tradition of interdisciplinary social work research.

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