

From cheerleaders to darts players:

User evaluation of caseworkers as performance measurement

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The public sector must consider what is produced and what are the conditions of production in the agencies we try to reform. Social services have the simple goal of serving or moving the client. But it is disturbing to discover that these goals are seldom really perceived and that nobody pays any serious attention to whether the user in fact has been served or moved as intended. In order to assess these services we need feedback from the user. To obtain such feedback demands that the user be given influence. In an empirical project parents' experiences with services to their disabled children have been surveyed and measured, and the results applied by the responsible authorities, in order to empower the users. The research was innovative because the results were applied at the same time as the research process continued. The coupling of research and practice in these activities has been fruitful and has resulted in development of a practical tool for evaluating social services. At the same time, this research and evaluation method has empowered the users of the services, rather than simply using them as subjects of the research.

Even if the goals of social services – such as vocational rehabilitation, child protection, aids for disabled people – are rather simple, actual social service production and delivery often looks more like performing a ritual than like striving to attain a goal.

Darts play

The goal of darts is to throw the arrow so that you hit the target in the centre. That is too obvious to be mentioned in the directions for use. Instead they state the distance you must have to the target and give you advice about security. This is important if you are to avoid creating damage. The rest of darts is self-evident. But then imagine playing darts in a coal dark room!

To play there you must really be clever. Professional education for darts players who work under these conditions should include an advanced course in dynamic mechanics and physiology to give the complete scientific description of all that could happen. If knowledge of theory is insufficient, the education of a darts player should also encompass exercises in gym and dance. With that you could perform as a cheerleader and show your abilities. But you still would not hit the target.

Until you get feedback from the wall where the darts land, you are working entirely in the dark. Could you get the target to say something about where you have hit, it would constitute a breakthrough for your darts! Even if it still is not simple, you have at least some possibility to begin to learn from experience and improve your results.

Social work

Social casework lies halfway between the performance of cheer leaders and darts players. The goal of a social service is most often simple: to bring an unemployed person into a job or to compensate for a disability, for example. In this respect casework has much in common with darts. But somehow goal attainment does not play any great role in a social service. Neither administrative leaders nor the responsible politicians try in any serious way to state the extent to which goals have been reached. In this respect caseworkers are treated more like cheerleaders than deliverers of service. What counts is how the service looks in the eyes of politicians and voters.

Scandinavian social protection has been built up through broad political compromises – in Denmark starting in 1891, and continuing with social reforms in 1933, the 1970s and 1998. The first social legislation gave fundamental social rights to provision of services under specified conditions and the reform in 1933 stated the *social rights principle*. The next reform introduced for real the *social services* by directly trying to create the reality desired. The main principles were stated as being: prevention, rehabilitation, maintenance and compensation. For families with disabled children this meant that the aim of social protection was that these families should be able to live a life with the same qualities as other families. The goals refer to the situation of the users.

Social services are social and services. *Social* means that they are not just produced for one user, but for a broader social interest. There are *secondary users*, that is, people who would have done some of the work if the public service had not been there, and *tertiary users*, people that in other ways benefit from the service. Secondary and tertiary users are not just shareholders who have an interest in the externalities of the service production. They are real users, and that is the reason why social services are financed with public money. Social services are oriented to a community.

A *service* is a product that is produced by a professional and consumed by a service user. This implies that the service producer with all her attitudes and personality is part of the product. This also implies that the service receiver is part of the product – the service consists in serving him (*1) or in some cases even in moving him, changing his situation in a way that is wanted by society. The service is only worth something if he feels served or if he himself agrees to move and the secondary and tertiary users feel satisfied too. Nobody but the user can reveal this.

Solving technical problems such as finding the right wheelchair or establishing appropriate care are important, but the *goal* of the social services for disabled children is to give equal possibilities to the family with a disabled child – that is to make sure that this family can have a life on equal terms with other families. This ideology of “normalisation” (*2) has been the principle of Danish social law since the seventies (Bengtsson 2001). So the goal is defined top-down, but in order to see if it is achieved we need a bottom-up process. The means by which the Social Service Law attains this goal is compensation. Since 1980, expenses in the area “disabled children in the home” have quadrupled, measured in purchasing power (reduced by the rate of inflation). But demands have increased too, and in many cases we see parents unsatisfied with an expensive service, delivered in Denmark by municipalities. With the recent expansions in funding, however, we *must* develop the means to make solutions that can work.

The user perspective

For quite a long time users have played a role in the development of social policy. Their influence began at the top of the system, in law making, and has then gradually permeated to the bottom, daily casework. Already in 1934, the Danish Council of Organisations of People with Disabilities

(in Danish DSI) was established and in the following years they took part in the preparation of laws. This culminated in 1965-72, when the DSI chairman headed the Social Reform Commission. The second social reform was therefore marked by disabled peoples' points of view, the so-called "Social Model": Social efforts became directed to removing community barriers, thus enabling people to solve their problems themselves.

In the next period, as the interest-group society developed, user organisations took more direct part in administration, participating increasingly in boards and councils. This culminated in the establishment of the Danish Disability Council in 1980 and its secretariat, the Equal Opportunities Centre in 1993. These bodies explore every corner of society in order to discover unequal treatment and take action to get this changed. As such, these bodies are guardians of a type of anti-discrimination legislation that is more collectively oriented than the Americans with Disability Act (*3). In recent times, user influence has increased, to give the individual user a greater role in his or her own case. Complaint councils have been established in all municipalities, and the so-called dialogue principle in social legislation of 1998 states that casework must be conducted in cooperation with the client. User surveys have become common and a number of experiments with user focus groups and other forms of influence have been made.

Nevertheless, benefits are not something dispersed by an automaton. You still have to go to the social authority to be granted services, which means that you cannot simply decide and act like other people, you are more or less put under tutelage. If the parents all want the best possible solution and this solution cannot be offered to all, they must compete with each other for limited resources. This prevents them from having the qualities that most other families have in their life. And if higher expenses only create more and more of this type of dissatisfaction, one could conclude that the goal of normalisation was unattainable.

In practise the municipality cooperates with the family, and the person who has the concrete task of making decisions is the caseworker. Thus the family's encounter with the municipal caseworker is crucial if social service to families with disabled children is to reach its goal. This is not so true if the issue concerns reaching the goal of finding appropriate provisions for the child, but is more true if the concern is to reach the more fundamental goal of giving the family possibilities of a life containing the same qualities as those of most other families. The job of making the parents accept the effort as reasonable and satisfactory may be more or less easy for the caseworker, dependent on the organisational structure of the municipality.

Most often politicians and management have little knowledge of how close families with disabled children have in fact come to a normal life. Information flows like water– downwards, and it is difficult to get it to flow the "wrong" way. Feedback from users to decision-makers is necessary if the latter are to have any capacity to correct the course. Those responsible for providing leadership to the social effort on a daily basis must be the social service management, and local politicians are responsible in the role of controlling board. Management and politicians are not only responsible for the financial aspects of the effort, they are also responsible for maintaining a professional standard. But they do not get information on how far from the target the darts hit.

Social service as we know it

Real, existing social services often resemble a game of darts played on a pitch-dark night. Social workers try, and throw as best they can, but their talents and tacit knowledge of casework differ. Maybe they see the target themselves and have personal satisfaction in hitting it, but they are

operating in an absurd environment where nobody else takes any notice of this. Reaching the goal of social services does not count, in any sense. Achieving an objective is not made a common goal of the working group. There is thus no profit from and no reinforcement created when people make social reality together.

The social service that is the subject of our research, service to families with disabled children, is rather simple. Here the goal of the social effort is simply compensation: the family should be given the possibility to live with the same qualities as other contemporary families. Thus the parents shall be served, not moved. The parents are the primary users. Although grandparents or siblings may be involved in some cases, secondary users are not significant actors here. The tertiary users are the employers of the parents. They have common interests with the parents of keeping them in the labour force and at the same time of getting the family to function. Thus feedback from primary users is enough, but it is also necessary in order to see whether the service really gives the user the possibility of a life with “normal” qualities, and does not make the family dependent – *unlike* other families today.

In most countries, having a disabled child constitutes a heavy economic burden for the family. Even in countries like Britain and the United States families with disabled children are poor because they must pay for most of their needs themselves and they are reported to have classical poverty problems (Middleton 1998). In a number of continental European states legislation gives this group a general right to compensation for the extra expenses involved in having a disabled child. The word compensation has to be understood literally in the Danish case. The law says that all extra expenses should be refunded, not only for necessary treatment, care and aids, but everything that the family needs for living an ordinary family life. This includes a refund to 100% of the wages the parents would have earned during the hours when they must accompany their children to treatment or the like. Often one of the parents is compensated for reduction of the weekly hours, in some cases for the entire wage. It even includes expenses incurred if the family has to employ one or more assistants to accompany them on holiday.

The frameworks, means and limitations of compensation are given by a social law, with official guidelines provided by the Ministry of Social Affairs, as clarified by the decisions taken by the National Board of Appeal (Ankestyrelsen). The Social Commission of the sixties visualised that the individual social worker, like a free professional, should use the tools available to reach the four goals of the social effort. In reality the citizen encounters a social authority and an organisation of service providers. A number of professionals are involved and deal with the family concerning a variety of issues, but the municipal caseworker is the person that represents the “system” to the family. The caseworker is the person that the family has to trust if it is to have some time and energy left for “a normal life” and not consume every bit of its energy in a struggle for the right to an optimal social service. The caseworker has the power in the relationship, and in addition she must be given a high degree of freedom in relation to municipal leaders if she is to be able to do her work.

As Lipsky (1980) has shown, this leaves her in a situation where it is possible to cut corners and take the line of least resistance, and when it comes to extremes to do the job in a ruthless egoist way with first priority to her own comfort instead of to realising the goal of her function. So the freedom that the caseworker must have often causes suspicion, and it may create an element of randomness. A recent Swedish study using among other things caseworker evaluation of “paper” cases found considerable variation in evaluations between caseworkers (Socialstyrelsen 2001).

Couldn't we control this "Lipsky-effect" with strong leadership in the social administration and in local politics? Perhaps, but if these controlling forces do not have a clear perception of the social services' goal attainment, we are not much better off with such organisational control. In such a case the social authority will only build up a set of rules to govern the work. As Crozier (1964) has shown, such organisations will form an arena where the groups will fight each other and not really cooperate. A social service demands true cooperation and thus can never function satisfactorily under these conditions, so the Crozier-effect is as dangerous for social services as the Lipsky-effect.

In our study the parents do not suspect caseworkers of making their jobs easy, but rather of having a concealed agenda of keeping expenses down because that is what local politicians want. If they are right, the Crozier effect should be a greater risk than the Lipsky effect. A consequence of Crozier-type bureaucracy that we have noticed is fights between departments. In some municipalities departments even encourage parents to complain about other departments. This behaviour does not promote attainment of the goal of a normal family life – in fact the most discontented parents we met in the project were just these parents who had been used in inter-departmental fighting.

Both professions and bureaucracy, we should remember, are inventions meant to counterbalance the raw power of influential ordemagogic politicians. But if a social service innovation is to benefit the users, both professionals and bureaucracy must be controlled too. This can be attained by measuring goal attainment of the service, thus *giving the users a greater say*. User influence is necessary because the goal of social services refers to the users situation. Feedback from the users is necessary in order to see if the goal of the effort is reached. User feedback makes visible the target that the darts are aimed at; without some user influence, services are throwing in the dark.

The point of departure for the empirical study reported in this paper has been to try to determine how far from the goal the service to parents with disabled children has hit, and what has been the form of deviations from the goal, seen from the point of view of the users. In other words, what have been the mechanisms for producing dissatisfaction with the system, in spite of the extensive resources used to achieve goals.

Applied social research

We have studied the service to disabled children as perceived by the parents in two projects. In the first, all parents to children with disabilities (beyond the minor one like peeing in the bed at night as we put it) in 11 municipalities were asked to fill out opinion-sheets answering the question: in which respects do you find the social effort from the public sector has functioned well in relation to your child, and in which respects do you find it has functioned less well? Replies were received from parents of 415 disabled children, that is 35 % of the sample – which we judge as a good result considering that we asked them to write with their own words and we did not send any reminder.

The report summarised the parents' criticisms, mainly: they do not feel adequately informed, they find the public effort uncoordinated and themselves forced to be the coordinators, it is difficult to get disabilities recognised as such if they are not quite obvious and especially if it is not possible to make a medical diagnosis (which is not demanded by social law), and the social caseworkers are very different– some are easy to cooperate with, others nearly impossible. Counting all the remarks in the sheets we found that 1/3 of the parents had solely positive remarks, but 1/5 had solely negative.

Traditionally a research project would have stopped here: the problems had been surveyed, and it would then be up to the practitioners to apply the results. However, we had the impression that the lack of implementation that we often observe is not just due to general inactivity by administrative people. We felt that the survey of problems was perhaps not a sufficient basis on which to base changes, and that we might have overlooked the questions that related to this very implementation process. We therefore defined a second project in order to concentrate on the implementation process and at the same time continue to throw light on the problems – the last issue because we wanted to link research and implementation.

The second project included a series of meetings in the municipalities. These were listening meetings – evenings where the parents were invited to come with their criticisms of the public effort in relation to their disabled child. A number of responsible municipal leaders had to listen without having an opportunity to utter a word. These meetings were followed by user panels, two evenings where the parents alone (with us as mediators) discussed the problems and arrived at concrete proposals for reforming the design of services. In a final dialogue meeting, the parents and the municipal staff and responsible leaders discussed the proposals. These meetings revealed the same set of problems as the opinion-sheets in the first project, but in a way that was much more action-provoking in the municipal system. They also revealed that many parents were willing to invest a lot of time in these meetings, formulating their problems and dialoguing with professionals and leaders.

Another feature of the second project was a quantitative survey on the basis of the opinion-sheets. The most frequently mentioned points in the sheets were transformed to structured questions with categories or questions where the parents were asked to evaluate from 0 to 9. The quantitative survey was mainly added in order to give more credibility to the results, because numbers make greater impressions on planners and politicians, and because we could reach a considerably higher response rate here – we reached a 68% response rate and had only a 5% refusal rate. The quantitative survey in fact confirmed the results of the first project in every detail. But it gave also an important qualification, showing that the caseworkers deliver very different quality of service. Perhaps the huge difference between caseworkers is the most remarkable result of all.

Service quality as perceived by the users

In the quantitative study, the *quality of the social effort* is measured as four variables: the overall evaluation (or total “marks”) of the caseworker, the evaluation of the cooperation with the authorities, the evaluation of the solutions that were obtained, and the overall evaluation of public social effort in relation to the child. The four quality measures all correlate with values between .58 and .45.

Quality of casework can, however, also be described by the problems that parents have and the actions they take when they are not satisfied: if parents feel they have been sufficiently informed, if they have sought information from other sources than the municipal caseworker, if the authorities have coordinated their effort, and if the parents have been forced to act as coordinators themselves. To counterbalance the power of the caseworker we invited parents to evaluate their latest caseworker on 11 specific dimensions and to give an overall evaluation. The dimensions were defined by the adjectives most frequently employed in the opinion-sheets to describe caseworkers:

Is a bad listener	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9	is a good listener
shows no confidence	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9	shows full confidence
is not committed	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9	is really committed
knows little of disability	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9	knows much about disability
does nothing to coordinate	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9	is a good coordinator
withholds information	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9	gives all relevant information
just running own ideas	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9	opens a dialogue with you
holds that you are using the system	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9	finds your demands reasonable
tries to tear you to pieces	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9	tries to support you
reacts only slowly	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9	reacts immediately
always has to ask the boss	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9	can make a decision herself
we give the caseworker a	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9	as total "marks"

Some of these properties are personal ones: a good listener, committed, opens a dialogue, tries to support you. Others are clearly linked to the organisation of the social authority: can make a decision herself (which presupposes that she is allowed to do so), reacts immediately and is a good coordinator (which presupposes that she can direct resources). One item relates to the caseworker's knowledge about disability. The remaining properties are both personal and have links to the style of the organisation.

We had expected these qualities to be mutually connected and they really are: the correlations are from .84 to .54. Most of the smaller correlations are found for the last quality, can make a decision herself, and some of them for knowledge about disability. But the qualities are not linked to municipality. This may be because the four municipalities in the study are much alike. The result may turn out differently if we at a later stage are able to include a greater number of municipalities.

We also asked about the name of the latest caseworker, which enabled us to sort answers on 19 specialist caseworkers (each evaluated by at least 8 parents, most of them in fact by 20 - 40), non-specialist caseworkers and finally unknown caseworkers from the four municipalities. In the study we investigated how much these qualities correlated with some other things evaluated by the parents.

The caseworker's personal qualities are important for a good service quality

Most of the quality measures show that around one third of the parents have received a good service, whereas a quarter have been treated in a way that is clearly unsatisfying. The exception is the parents' evaluation of the caseworker. This evaluation tends to be more positive than the others, only one tenth of the parents having a caseworker they evaluate as very bad. We understand this fact as indicating that the parents are satisfied with having one single person as contact to the entire social system, the structure that was introduced 1976 and is called the unified system.

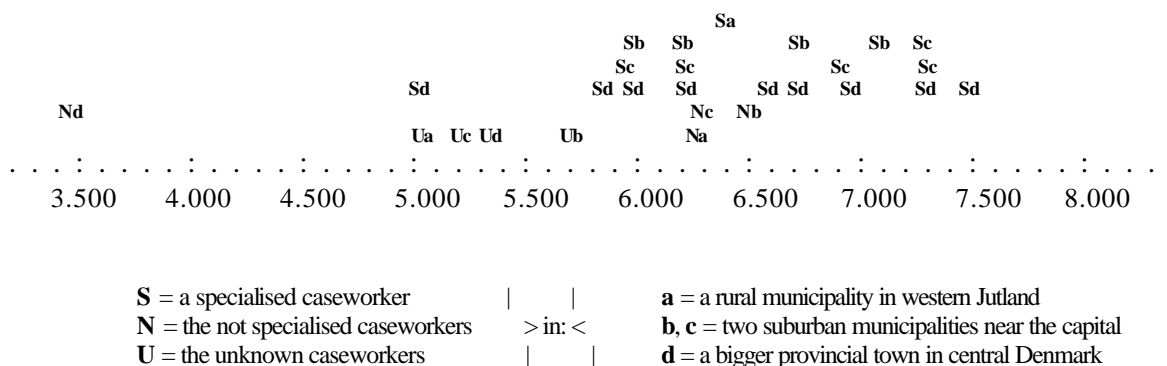
In asking what makes a caseworker good or bad in the eyes of the parents and then considering responses against an overall evaluation of their caseworker, all of the eleven properties mentioned correlate well, from .87 to .67. The strongest correlations are found with: is committed .87, is a good listener .85, opens a dialogue .85 and tries to support you .83 – all of these items being personal properties of the caseworker. The smallest correlations are with "knows much about disability" (.68) and "can make a decision herself" (.67).

If we then consider parents' evaluation of cooperation with the authorities and the parents' evaluation of the solutions that are obtained, the biggest correlation (.48) is found with "gives all relevant information". We have considered this as a quality that is both personal and organisational. The second to fourth correlations (.45 to .42) are found with the personal qualities "tries to support you", "is committed" and "opens a dialogue". The smallest correlations are again with "knows much about disability" (.35) and "can make a decision herself" (.34).

So if we ask the parents to evaluate their caseworker we get all of the four personal qualities we ask for as the four most important, and knowledge about disability and organisational qualities as the less important ones. If we ask for the other indicators of good quality – good cooperation, good solutions and overall evaluation – we also get personal qualities such as support, commitment and dialoguing as important, but only next to the *openness and information readiness* of the caseworker or of the system.

This confirms the main conclusions of the qualitative study, which provided the foundation for the questionnaire (Bengtsson & Middelboe 2001), namely that lack of information is the most important problem reported by parents, and that the encounter between user and caseworker is of great importance. The importance of the caseworker appears also when we compare the 19 specialised caseworkers that have been evaluated by a sufficient number of parents. By making an average of parents' evaluations for *all* parents who have the same caseworker we neutralise the effect that stems from having a "good chemistry" with one parent and a bad chemistry with another, and get an expression for the talent or ability the caseworker has in dealing with the parents. The average evaluations are shown on the figure below.

Figure 1: Average "marks" on a scale from 0 to 9 of 19 specialist caseworkers and 8 types of other caseworkers in four municipalities



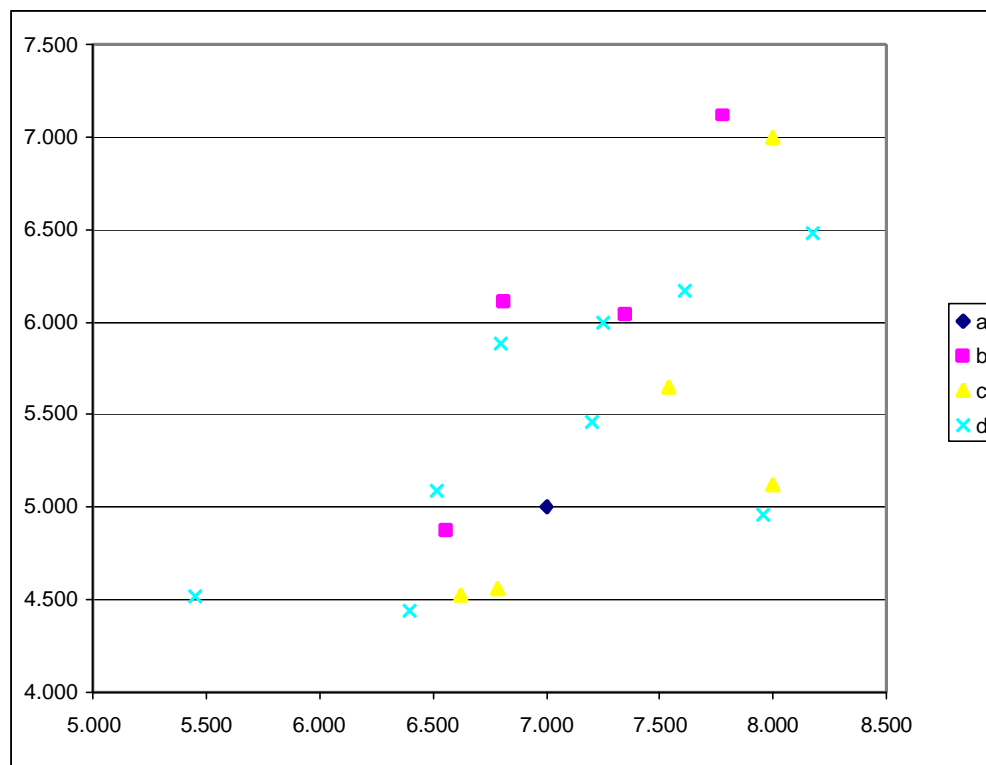
Municipality is important because they have a high degree of freedom: they can define their own administrative structure exactly as they like without being limited by any prescriptions. Some take care of disabled children in a department of children, others in a department of disability, others

have a special department of disabled children, whereas smaller municipalities have broader units. All of these possibilities are represented in the study. Therefore we expected marked differences between municipalities, but that was not the case. Comparing the specialised caseworkers from the four municipalities in an analysis of variance, we find a significant difference between individual caseworkers, but no significant difference between municipalities.

We note further that the not specialised caseworkers from municipality D are rated far below any others, and the unknown caseworkers (where the parents have not given the name) plus one of the specialised caseworkers are rated rather low too.

Parents' evaluation of the public effort in relation to their disabled child as a whole is also dependent on who is their actual caseworker. This is remarkable because many of the parents have changed caseworker several times during the years they have had contact to the social authorities. An analysis of variance however shows that both the caseworker and the municipality make a difference. The average "mark" of the caseworkers and the average satisfaction with the public effort given by parents having the same caseworker are – as one would expect – related. But some caseworkers are rated a little higher than the result they produce, some are rated a little lower.

Figure 2: The relation between the average of user evaluations for the 19 caseworkers (horizontal) and the average evaluation of social effort for parents (vertical), both on a scale from 0 to 9



Note: Every marked point represents parents who have a particular caseworker. The municipalities a, b, c and d are the same as in figure 1.

The diagram indicates that even if the analysis has shown a difference between the municipalities in the y direction (evaluation of social effort), the caseworker makes a lot more difference for the family than the municipality.

Finally, we find that parents' evaluations of the solutions that are obtained do not vary significantly neither with actual caseworker nor with municipality. We think that "solution" is understood by the parents in a technical sense, as e.g. finding the right wheelchair, establishing the right kindergarten solution, and so on. Such things are easier to judge by the appeals court. By contrast, we think that parents' evaluation of the public effort as a whole can be considered an indicator that the goal of the law – making a normal family life possible – is obtained, whereas the evaluation of the caseworker can be considered a judgement of her personal qualities. We conclude therefore that the present system can produce the technical solutions but is weaker in ensuring the possibility of a normal family life for parents with disabled children.

Organisation is important when the problem is a bad service quality

Lack of information is the problem that most parents mention. The three questions concerning whether parents have obtained enough information from municipal caseworkers – on the disability, on public offers and on social rights – are only answered confirmatively by 26-30%, and only 15% hold that they have been sufficiently informed on all three items. The questions on information are connected with all of the eleven qualities of the caseworker, with correlations from .42 to .19.

In contrast to the general quality questions considered above, being informed is connected to caseworker qualities that are more related to the organisation, although some personal qualities also appear. For all three types of information we find that the most connected organisational quality is that the caseworker is a good coordinator, the most connected mixed quality that the caseworker gives all relevant information, and the most connected personal quality is the commitment of the caseworker. The biggest correlations are:

Have you been sufficiently informed by the municipal social workers about:

The disability:

knows much about disability .32
 is a good coordinator .29
 gives all relevant information .29
 can make a decision herself .26
 is really committed .23

public offers:

gives all relevant information .42
 is a good coordinator .41
 is really committed .34
 knows much about disability .34
 opens a dialogue with you .33

social rights:

gives all relevant information .35
 is a good coordinator .33
 is really committed .31
 can make a decision herself .31
 is a good listener .29

Half of the parents report that they have sought information from other sources because they got too little information from the municipal caseworker, and likewise half of the parents report that they have been forced to coordinate the effort themselves because the authorities did not do so. These two questions distinguish parents that are really unsatisfied with something and are taking action in this connection. What has this then to do with the way they evaluate their caseworker? These variables, too, are connected to all of the eleven caseworker properties with correlations from -.49 to -.30 for the first and from -.37 to -.21 for the second mentioned.

Here the organisation qualities and knowledge about disability are at the top of the list, and the personal qualities are at the bottom. Being a good coordinator, reacting immediately and giving all relevant information are in both cases the most important organisational (and mixed) qualities, and opens a dialogue is the most important personal quality. Here the biggest correlations are:

Seeking for information from other sources because they got too little from the municipal caseworker:

knows much about disability -.49
is a good coordinator -.49
gives all relevant information -.47
reacts immediately -.45
can make a decision herself -.44
opens a dialogue with you -.43

Being forced to coordinate the social effort themselves:

reacts immediately -.37
is a good coordinator -.34
gives all relevant information -.33
knows much about disability -.29
opens a dialogue with you -.29
can make a decision herself -.29

So we must conclude that if we ask positive questions about good quality, the answers are strongly connected with personal qualities with the caseworkers, which is confirmed by the fact that we find a significant difference between the evaluations of individual caseworkers. The answers are also connected to the other caseworker qualities – organisation and knowledge – although less strongly. If we however ask more negative questions about the problems that parents have, we find a strong connection with the organisation qualities and knowledge, and a less strong connection with personal qualities.

An applicable research on social service quality

Quite a lot of researchers are dissatisfied with the practical people they suppose should use their research because they often fail to do so. Our point of departure however has been the idea that non-use of research perhaps may be due to an incompleteness of the same research. Natural sciences do not stop at the university with publishing an article, which they then suppose can be applied. The scientists are also in industry and the research continues in the application process and even into the phase of developing mass production. Why then should social scientists not do the same, and investigate whether there are not some more scientific questions appearing in the process of transforming research results into practical action?

The continuation of the present project after a diagnosis of the problems had been made has in fact not only stimulated the application of results, but has also given new unexpected results. So the quantitative research, which was added mainly to document the findings of the first opinion-sheets in a way that would be more convincing to politicians and decision makers gave, as mentioned, an unexpected finding too: it showed convincingly that the caseworker is most important for the quality of the service. We cannot so far see why it is so – whether it is the personality and the talents for social work, or it is because of the education and the experience caseworkers have. We can only state that the professional person is most important, and hence that the management of the social service for parents with disabled children must try to take account of this fact and be aware of its importance. One possible way would be to identify the most “expert” caseworkers and give them a role as supervisors.

The action research in our project involved as mentioned a number of meetings where parents made their attitudes and proposals clear and came into dialogue with the authorities, that is those in municipal administrations. These meetings were primarily made part of the research because they should give an impulse to the authorities and encourage them to apply the results of our researches

as a whole. Besides confirming the results of the preceding qualitative research, they also appeared to be an instrument that can be taken into use by the authorities as part of their service. Through the proceedings of these meetings we got the impression that such a dialogue forum can fulfil the function of transforming parents from frustrated, powerless and hence very dissatisfied users of the public services, to parents who feel that the authorities are listening to them. That means that they become much more cooperative and it becomes easier for the parents to accept the help that is offered by the public authorities as sufficient. In this way the families come closer to the goal of a life with the same qualities as other families have.

After the report on the opinion sheets, the meetings and preliminary findings from the quantitative research, a one-day seminar was held with all caseworkers from the municipalities, their leaders and a few other persons – such as therapists and psychologists – having to do with these parents. Here the findings were discussed from the point of view that the experience should be transformed to a handbook on organisation of the social effort for parents with disabled children. Thus the seminar should produce the points of view of the professionals for this handbook, whereas the meetings and opinion-sheets had produced the points of view of the parents. At the moment we are writing all this together to the first draft of the handbook, which then has to be commented by the caseworkers, their leaders and other professionals and perhaps debated on another one-day seminar.

With this procedure we aim to assure that research in this field becomes cumulative. We hope to be able to form a network of municipalities in a future research project encompassing a large number of municipalities, so that they can support each other in maintaining and developing the handbook and the knowledge that it represents. The research should also give input to politicians on local and national level. User feedback is not easy to obtain in a system like the present that favours what we call Crozier and Lipsky effects, dependent on whether traditional bureaucracy (of strong states) or trade union culture (of weaker states) is predominant. It could inspire politicians to experiment with other organisational forms in social services than state administration or commercial enterprise. A more appropriate form of user influence is the user cooperative. Findings by Victor Pestoff (1998) from Sweden show that user cooperative kindergartens is the organisational form that gives parents the greatest say and the greatest satisfaction with the service.

Perspectives

Measurement of user satisfaction and effects of the service from the users' point of view opens certain perspectives. The user gets a powerful place, and this is the moment of truth for all who are concerned with social protection: we are forced to take a stand and decide whether we think that social service shall really fulfil the purpose of serving the user as it pretends to, or if we in reality prefer a social service that carries out a ritual-like, cheerleader function, giving us a performance we like to look at, even if – or just because – it in reality has the function of suppressing the user. If cheerleaders really are to be replaced with darts managers, we need a lot more research into the question of which caseworker qualities count in attaining a good result from the work. To be honest we don't at all know how much education, experience, talents or just simple tricks count. And the reason why we lack this knowledge is that nobody has been really curious about it.

We have – admittedly – made things simple by defining the goals of social services in a way that unites top-down and bottom-up perspectives and thus made the goals seem utterly simple. Naturally the parties in this game, local politicians and administrative leaders, professional social workers and parents with disabled children, may have differing opinions of goal attainment, and all of them surely have a problem of trustworthiness: the parents of course could have an interest in getting the

most support out of the situation, whereas private interests of the “bosses” and the professionals are reflected by our concepts of Crozier and Lipsky effects. These days we often hear NGOs, political parties and even political bodies such as the European Union talk of citizens’ right to a voice in connection with social citizenship. We are not at all against such a right, but we have tried to argue that with our simplifying assumptions we need not go so far in order to argue that user influence is a necessary element of social service. Empowerment is often proposed as a goal for social work because it helps the client to manage his life. But empowerment is also needed for a more elementary reason: It is the only means we have for measuring whether the services achieve their goal, and is therefore an absolute necessity for managing an innovative process.

As the research is ongoing it is too early to draw more conclusions. Yet one result deserves a comment. Overall evaluations of services were fairly alike across municipalities but differed widely between caseworkers. If this is a general pattern it is a serious challenge to conventional thinking related to the quality of social services. Usually the argument goes that to ensure quality, control by central authorities or auditing bodies is necessary. But if the problem is not to govern the municipal administrations, but to govern *within* these same municipalities, social service innovation has to be thought of in quite different terms. Then the role of central authorities – Parliament, government, audit agency – would be to ensure that local governance finds a form that furthers goal attainment. Besides controlling “city kings” with law, bureaucracy and professionalisation, it is necessary to install a type of user voice if the Crozier effect and Lipsky effect are to be countered.

Note

(*1) We use the pronoun “he” for the user of social services and “she” for the caseworker. The vast majority of caseworkers in fact are women, so 18 of the specialised caseworkers in the study are women and just 1 is a man.

(*2) We use “normalisation” in a quite simple way as “equal life opportunities” and do not go into the subtleties of the concepts that are discussed in common texts.

(*3) It is often stated that Denmark has no anti-discrimination legislation in contrast to most other European countries. That is true, but it can be argued that the mentioned legislation fulfils the purpose of limiting discrimination as good or better than a common anti-discrimination legislation, see Bengtsson (2001).

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