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Promoting practitioner research through a social work teaching partnership

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Abstract

Research is critical for effective and innovative social work practice, yet social workers do not always have time to engage with research and there are limited accounts of how practitioners can undertake research in practical and meaningful terms (Mitchell, Lunt, and Shaw 2010). Using a reflective, storytelling methodology (Beresford 2016), which centres experiential knowledge, we describe how one regional social work teaching partnership nurtured practitioner research over a three-year period. We introduce a regionally administrated 'hub', that connected social workers and academics and supported the development of seventeen research teams. The studies that resulted, focused on a range of important issues including child protection, young people in transition to adult services, adults in community and residential settings, lived experience-led provision, and social work education. In terms of limitations, our reflections are descriptive and illuminative, rather than critical, our findings are also not representative but rather reflect a snapshot of practice. Despite limitations, this commentary reveals the feasibility and value of proactively nurturing practitioner research and offers a blueprint for cultivating similar initiatives in other regions.

Key words Practitioner research, teaching partnership, evidence-based practice, reflective practice.

Introduction

Social work requires a robust evidence base to support effective interventions, yet social work research only minimally influences practice, indicating that the profession should address the research-practice disconnect (Teater 2017).

'Practitioner-researchers' combine their positions within practice with conducting research concerning that practice (Dahlberg and McCaig 2010, 3). As such they can potentially bridge this disconnect, yet practitioner research remains in its infancy due to a lack of training, supervisory support and recognition of the potential of research by practitioners and organisations (Hardwick and Worsley 2011). Practical barriers also exist including practitioners' lack of access to libraries and mentorship, limited time for research in busy workplaces, unfamiliarity with publishing conventions, and 'personal roadblocks [including] the "leap of confidence" required for practitioners to expose themselves to a wider, and potentially critical, audience' (Gordon, Rixon, and Cooper 2017, 222). Despite barriers, social workers are ideally placed to undertake research as they often know the most relevant and meaningful questions to ask and understand the field. In turn, research can increase professional skills, promote reflective and reflexive learning (Dahlberg and McCaig 2010) and develop critical thinking skills (Newman and McNamara 2016). Professional bodies also emphasise the importance of being a research-informed practitioner (e.g., Social Work England [2019], professional standard 4).

Research can be instrumental in the development of effective practice outcomes, providing ways to measure the needs of populations, understand lived experiences and select approaches supported by evidence. By researching specific problems, social workers can also become agents of macro change, devising policies and interventions to alter inequalities in their agencies and communities (Faulkner and Faulkner 2018, 1-2). In addition to improving outcomes, research activity can help to build *learning organisations*, in which a spirit of inquiry is encouraged. This can strengthen social workers' professional identity and the standing of the profession more widely (Boddy, Daly, and Munch 2012; Dahlberg and McCaig 2010; Gordon, Rixon, and Cooper 2017). Rasmussen (2011, 31) found that bringing practitioners and academic writers together facilitated mutual learning.

Whilst practitioner research can enhance good practice and learning, accounts of the research process are often thin or describe isolated studies (Mitchell, Lunt, and Shaw 2010). Orme and Powell (2008) have argued that to better facilitate research-informed practice, learning communities should be created across academic and practice settings. MacRae, Smith, and Cree (2016) agree that partnership working between organisations and universities can encourage research contributions from practitioners. Such partnerships can also make a significant difference to service delivery (Fouché 2015). Our commentary describes an approach to nurturing such research partnerships in the hope of inspiring others across England and beyond. We reflect on how social work academics and practitioners used a regional teaching partnership to forge seventeen local practitioner-academic research teams.

Social Work Teaching Partnerships (SWTPs) were developed in England by the Department for Education (DfE) and Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) following two reviews of social work education (Narey 2014; Croisdale-Appleby 2014) (Department for Education (DfE) 2020a, 4). They aimed to enhance collaborative working between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and service providers (i.e., Local Authorities, the National Health Service, voluntary and private sector services) (Berry-Lound, Tate and Greatbatch 2016). SWTPs were funded in three phases – four partnerships in the phase one pilot (2015), nine partnerships in phase two (2017) and ten in phase three (2018) (DfE 2020a, 4). The Cheshire and Merseyside Social Work Teaching Partnership (CMSWTP) was funded in 2018.

CMSWTP is a collaboration between four HEIs, eight Local Authorities, three NHS Trusts and one Voluntary Agency, its vision is to improve the life chances of children, young people, adults and their families by improving the recruitment, retention, training and development of social workers (CMSWTP 2019a). To realise this vision, an implementation plan with thematic workstreams was devised. The

'Post-qualifying' workstream was focused on the retention, training and development of social workers post-qualification and included a goal to nurture and support practitioner research. To advance this aim, a 'research hub' sub-group was created so that interested parties could work on practical objectives and report back to the workstream. By 21/22, the SWTP had adopted a priority to: *Nurture the coproduction of knowledge between practitioners and academics to influence change at practice and systems level.*

In his review of social work education, Croisdale-Appleby (2014, 17) argued that to be a credible profession, social workers must be equipped to carry out research as part of their practice, noting that research is integral to demonstrating professional leadership. In concluding his report, Croisdale-Appleby (2014, 33) recommended:

That all future qualifying education delivers newly qualified social workers with the capability to engage in research *throughout their career*, inculcating an understanding that the ability to carry out research is an essential component in their professional capability in practice (emphasis added).

However, practitioner research is often framed in a 'deficit' way, highlighting how practitioners can lack skills, time, support, etc. (Lunt and Shaw 2017, 214). In contrast, we take an *appreciative* approach (Robinson et al. 2013), illustrating that practitioners and academics bring different strengths to research and that there is value in cross institutional working for shared goals. We begin by explaining our approach to this article and to nurturing partnerships, before presenting our 'results' i.e., the partnerships that have developed and how these have been experienced.

Methods

This commentary adopts a reflective, critical storytelling approach (Beresford 2016), drawing on experiential knowledge and academic literature. It weaves together

published research findings with seven workers' experiences of stimulating practitioner research. Our authorship team is comprised of two social work practitioners, a social work researcher, three social work academics, and the SWTP manager. The experiential 'data' we present result from collective reflections on the work of the CMSWTP research hub to address the lack of descriptions of researcher practice partnerships (Mitchell, Shaw and Lunt 2008). Our reflections centred around three steps taken to encourage practitioner research: *promoting* research partnerships; *investing* in practitioner research; and *nurturing* practitioner research. These steps are mapped below.

Promoting research partnerships

In September 2019, CMSWTP organised a free conference for all members, including social workers, managers, academics, students and people with lived experience. The aims were to present examples of successful research partnerships, discuss challenges and create opportunities for practitioner-research ideas and partnerships to be developed. Presentations included:

- "All our justice": reflections on a community practitioner – academic writing partnership (see Buck et al. [2020])
- "Delivering Contextual Safeguarding": a social worker's reflections on a local authority – university partnership (see Firmin and Lloyd [2020])
- A Social work practitioner's reflection on undertaking research in practice.
- "How research can change people's lives" – from a researcher who has previously used social services.

Round table sessions linked practitioners and academics to consider shared interests and ways to overcome barriers to research. We invited practitioners to suggest ideas for research that would assist them in their workplaces and academic partners to submit short profiles of their research interests and contact details. This enabled us to match practitioners with academics. Academic staff were able to help practitioners

to refine research questions, methodologies and costings and access literature via university libraries. Practitioners brought valuable working knowledge of contemporary practice challenges and access to possible participants.

The SWTP manager sought feedback from the 85 conference attendees via anonymous evaluation forms. 100% of the 16 survey respondents rated the event 8/10 or higher for 'overall satisfaction'. Each also identified a key message they would 'take away', these included: *it is possible to conduct research whilst in practice; a concrete idea for a research project; networking; motivation to re-engage in education and research; the importance of involving people with lived experience in research and the importance of co-production*. Identified 'barriers to undertaking research', included *time limits; access to research supervision; caseloads; manager priorities; and confidence*.

Investing in practitioner research

The 2019 conference also launched the first practitioner-research funding opportunity, to fund studies throughout 2020-2021. The CMSWTP Strategic Board assigned 12% of their £270,000 funding (£33,000) to 'practitioner research' and social workers who wished to undertake research could bid for monies (up to £8000 per project in round 1). In 2021 (round 2) the CMSWTP board agreed to commit a further £20,000 to the practitioner research initiative and social workers were invited to bid for up to £4000 per study, to take place in 2021-2022. Funds were smaller in the second round given that central funding for teaching partnerships had reduced. By 2022 (round 3-4), there was even more reduced funding available for teaching partnerships and CMSWTP moved to a subscription model to improve sustainability. This meant that each local partner agreed to pay a subscription to the SWTP to continue coordination and work on strategic goals. To ensure that funding would still be available for practitioner research, the SWTP manager made a (successful) bid to the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR), a

major funder of global health research. This created funding to support more research applications from practitioners and academics across 2022-2023 (round 5).

At each funding stage, all social work teams in the SWTP were emailed opportunities. The process was deliberately straightforward to prevent 'turning off' practitioners who lacked experience. A concise, accessible application form was devised, requesting proposers to identify: *a research topic; background; potential benefits to organisations; the research team; aims and objectives; planned approach; whether ethical approval was in process or help was needed; study duration and cost breakdown*. CMSWTP offered applicants guidance on what would be considered for funding (e.g., staff buy-out (temporary staff cover to carry out research), research training, transcribing, volunteer costs, events, and assistive technologies) and what would not be considered (e.g., overseas travel, alcohol). The SWTP manager also invited potential applicants to informally 'sound out' ideas with her and gain clarity of what was required. Five criteria were used to review bids against: *What will funding be used for? Does it meet the aims of the CMSWTP? Is it feasible? Is it original? Will it have impact?* Eleven bids were received in round one. A panel comprised of academic researchers, social workers and the SWTP manager reviewed applications. Of the eleven applications, one was approved without conditions, four were approved subject to minor modifications, four were approved subject to major modifications. Two projects were not approved due to a lack of detail and offered support to amend applications but did not re-submit. Following this process, four studies in total met the conditions and commenced.

The successful research teams reported progress to the partnership on a quarterly basis (for information on teams, see table 1 in results section below). Teams also presented updates on projects via monthly 'lunch and learn' sessions, which were open to all SWTP members as continuing professional development (CPD). CPD

events took place online due to the Covid-19 pandemic and were free for social workers, academics and students to attend. In 2020, the partnership board offered a 6-month extension to the original 12-month timescale to acknowledge the impact that pandemic restrictions had had on research plans. Round one research projects were therefore due to complete in March 2022. Many of these studies resulted in significant outcomes, others faced challenges that will be explored in the results section.

Round two funding was awarded in January and November 2021. We added a short video to the CMSWTP website explaining the funding application process and answering some 'frequently asked questions' from practitioners. Five projects were submitted and approved in 2021 and will report in November 2023. We are not certain why the number of applications were lower in 2021 compared to 2020 but we theorise that the ongoing global pandemic may have featured. Amadasun (2020, 753) notes that 'the social work profession, more than any other, is most hurt by the rampaging coronavirus pandemic given the scourge's pernicious impact on society's underserved and undervalued populations'. Whilst round one projects (2020-21) were considered during the early days of the pandemic, the conference and much of the project planning had taken place prior to lockdown restrictions. We hypothesise that the galvanising factors of a face-to-face conference, networking, and forging of working partnerships were much missed in the second round and hope to plan more of these events now Covid-19 restrictions have lifted.

Nurturing practitioner research

It was important that the SWTP continued to offer support beyond initial injections of funding, particularly as known barriers to practitioner research include a lack of confidence, training, and support (Hardwick and Worsley 2011; Gordon, Rixon, and Cooper 2017). Brief written and video summaries were posted online to support

practitioners, e.g., *practitioner research methods, creative and arts-based methods, transformative research, user-controlled research* and *incorporating research into everyday practice*. Monthly online CPD sessions were also hosted by academics covering topics requested by practitioners (e.g., framing a research question, quantitative methods, photo methods, focus groups, interviews, ethical issues, analysing data, writing up research). Feedback from attendees was positive, including how enjoyable sessions were, how information was explained in a simple and practical way, how they provided a steppingstone and inspired people to do research themselves.

Results: research partnerships nurtured

Over a three-year period, impacted by a global pandemic, the CMSWTP was able to connect seventeen practitioner research teams and offer financial and practical support:

Table 1. Studies funded by the research hub, including personnel and funding round.

Studies were funded between 2019 and 2022.

No.	Study title	Research team personnel	Funding round
1.	Social work Students with Dyslexia: what are the challenges and what strategies can be used to provide effective support in university and on placement?	Social worker and academic researcher	1
2.	How can we more fully include lived experiences of (former) service users in the co-production of knowledge? Lived experiences of prison suicide prevention.	Five former-prisoner volunteers and three academic researchers	1
3.	Photo voice: A visual narrative of peer-led crime prevention.	Two voluntary sector leaders and an academic researcher	1
4.	How can adult social workers appropriately support older people who experience loneliness or social isolation?	Local authority social work manager and two researchers	1

5.	What difference does a Parent/ Connected Carer Participation Group make in local authority child protection, child in need and child looked after social work?	Local authority social worker and academic researcher	2
6.	What are frontline practitioners' experiences of increasing Care Orders at home?	Local authority social worker and academic researcher	2
7.	A profile of students admitted to the social work degree in the CMSWTP Region.	Two social work researchers	2
8.	From student to practitioner; race, racism, and social work.	Three academic researchers and a practitioner research student	2
9.	How can social workers, community care workers and care providers creatively support capacitated adults in 24-hour care settings to reduce the impacts imposed by Health Guidance during the Covid-19 pandemic?	Two local authority social workers and four care providers	2
10.	The training needs of health and social work professionals working with adolescents transitioning between child and adult health and social work services.	Local authority social worker and academic researcher	3
11.	A comparative analysis of Practice Education within Local Authority Placements: off-site versus on-site Practice Education.	Two practice educators and an academic researcher	3
12.	Social work with Conviction: Experiences of social work course admission for applicants with criminal convictions.	Three academic researchers with local authority and lived experience advisors	4
13.	Developing a Child Sexual Abuse Assessment Tool for Social workers across the region.	An academic researcher and social workers from two local authorities	4
14.	Photovoice: A visual story of community coproduction.	A voluntary sector manager and two academic researchers	4
15.	Reflecting on preparedness for child protection practice: what are the messages of newly qualified child protection social workers and their managers for social work education providers and their curriculum?	An academic researcher and social workers from three local authorities	5

16.	Wellbeing of social workers in a transmutative health environment. Key issues effecting the workforce which will play a role in retention, recruiting and maintaining a workforce post Covid-19.	An academic researcher and a social worker from an NHS Trust.	5
17.	A scoping review to identify different types of social care interventions for care leavers who are not Care Act eligible, and to understand how effective these are.	Two academics and a local authority principal social worker.	5

In just three years, the CMSWTP has nurtured research on a broad range of social work issues, which span the life course from child protection, through adolescence to adult practice settings. There is also a clear focus on social work education and workforce development and on co-production and lived experience involvement. Some of these studies are now complete and have reported impactful results. For example, the study of social work students with dyslexia was published in a social work journal (Hewson and Gant 2020) and developed into a webinar for university staff and students. It examines some of the struggles navigating placements with dyslexia/ dyspraxia and makes recommendations for educators in university and practice settings.

The study which included service users in co-producing knowledge brought together former-prisoner peer supporters and researchers, to explore lived experiences of suicide prevention in prisons. It offers insight into the prison mental health crisis, highlighting risks of peer support and uncovers inconsistencies in training and working conditions, and high levels of self-harm and suicidality which can result in secondary trauma. The project advocates improved support for peer workers and more comprehensive and specialist mental health services. A summary of findings was submitted as evidence to the Justice Committee Inquiry into Mental Health in Prisons (Buck 2021), training was delivered to a national charity and a journal article is under review.

The photovoice study of peer-led crime prevention was coproduced by two formerly imprisoned community practitioners and an academic researcher. It aimed to amplify the voices of people delivering and using a lived experience-led crime prevention project. Participants revealed how in contexts of suffering and social exclusion, forms of hopeful, loving, inclusive, community praxis can be impactful. Findings were presented in an online report (Buck, Ryan and Ryan 2021) at the British Society of Criminology conference (2021) and local community photography exhibitions. A journal article is also under review.

The study of race, racism, and social work has obtained a range of lived experiences and findings have fed into the development of an innovative *Each One Teach One* network (CMSWTP 2019b), which is working toward anti-racist systemic changes within our partnership and beyond. As a counter to racial discrimination and exclusion, *Each One Teach One* supports social workers to name racism, listen to people with lived experience, take responsibility, work collaboratively, challenge appropriately, be open to learning and ensure people feel included.

For many of the other studies, completion has been delayed by the pandemic and/or ethical approval processes, which can be complex and time-consuming (Carey 2019). To better understand the experiences of research teams and what additional support may be needed, the research hub employed a student to undertake an evaluation. Findings will inform plans for ongoing funding and support. Before we conclude, we include some co-author reflections to offer some insight into the personal and professional impact of the practitioner-research initiative.

Practitioner Reflection – Helen Jones

I have been a registered social worker since qualifying in 1999, I gained my degree in 2000. My main area of work has been adult community mental health, until the last four years when I have worked as a Best Interest Assessor within the Deprivation of

Liberty safeguards team. I am also a qualified Practice Educator, having supported many students over the years. As a social worker I have always had a passion for research to be incorporated into practice. I identified how behind social work is regarding research and development when compared to our health colleagues. So, when I saw the position for *Voluntary Lead Research Practitioner* in the research hub, I was so excited. I took up post in 2020 and have been involved in decisions about bids submitted for research funding.

One advantage of the CMSWTP funding scheme is linking the practitionerresearcher with a university for support, which is especially beneficial to social workers who may be researching for the first time. We also link practitioners with more experienced colleagues. For example, when a practitioner from my local authority submitted a bid for research funds, I supported them to develop data collection methods, which strengthened the bid and enabled it to meet the criteria for funding. We worked together to explore methodologies that would collate data and fit with the practitioner's availability and research skills.

On a personal level, this platform has enabled me to revisit a piece of research on transitions that I completed three years ago but did not disseminate. This research focused on practitioners working with young people in transition from child to adult mental health services. Through my work in the research hub, I connected with an academic who had completed a similar piece of work from a physical health perspective. Together we asked the following questions of our data sets: *What are the identified training needs of health and social work professionals working with adolescents transitioning between children's and adult's health and social work services? What are the recommendations for social work education and practice?* We worked together to secure funding for further data analysis, and we plan to publish our findings.

Academic reflection – Andrea Newman

The under-representation of Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Social work students and practitioners has been an area of concern both nationally and locally over the last three decades (Department for Education 2020b). We are aware of the problems with the term 'BAME' and do not wish to infer that those included in the term represent a homogenous group, it is used here as an acronym to communicate the experience of minoritised groups, as opposed to a homogenising noun. Racism has impacted on progression and outcomes for social work students, with practice learning components of courses posing particular challenges (Masocha 2015; Tedam 2014). Added to this has been the marked lack of progression of BAME practitioners to managerial and leadership roles, and opportunities to be practice educators (Coulshed et al. 2018). BAME students are also more likely to be called to fitness to practice panels, and less likely to complete their social work course or assessed year in employment (ASYE) (Skills for Care 2021).

Against this backdrop, our research study, led by three Black female lecturers and a social work practitioner research student, explores the local lived experiences and perspectives of BAME students and practitioners. The project adopts a collaborative approach, drawing on participatory action research methodology (Newman and McNamara 2016) and is underpinned by an anti-racist framework (Akom 2011) to support local BAME students and practitioners to come together in a safe space for dialogue and discussion. After asking students and practitioners what questions they felt needed to be asked in the research, we conducted online focus groups and interviews. Participants reported that they valued having a safe space to discuss the really important issues of race and racism in social work. Focus group findings will be disseminated in a report and policy and practice recommendations will be made to the CMSWTP.

SWTP manager reflection – Nicola Whiteside

Our focus on developing joint learning between practitioners and academics has produced improved working relationships, research mindedness and examples of changed systems and practice. Overall, the CMSWTP has formalised collaborative working, been a catalyst for cultural change in the way partners work together and achieved faster and more effective operational progress. Enablers have included:

- A large partnership of four HEIs, eight Local Authorities and three Trusts, which provides the opportunity to build effective working relationships.
- A SWTP Manager who has a background in higher education has helped to drive the research agenda across the teaching partnership.
- Identified leads from practice and academia driving the research hub.
- Individual champions who are passionate about research, raise awareness and encourage colleagues.
- An easy to navigate funding process with timelines and quick turn around on support, so not to delay or add barriers to progress.
- The opportunity to bid for and secure funding (e.g., from the NIHR) to continue the work.

Benefits and early outcomes have included:

- A 'space' for practitioners to network, consider potential research projects and discuss how they may take initial steps. This has reinvigorated professionals in their current roles and provided an avenue for them to consider in their career, whilst remaining in social work.
- A forum to share barriers and consider solutions, including examples from those who have successfully navigated practitioner research.
- Academics have fed back that without the funding they would not have been able to engage in some of the research they have.
- Practitioners have fed back that without the funding or a focus on practitioner research they would never have started on their own research journey.

- Opportunities for practitioners to link with academics with shared interests has enhanced learning on both sides. Support workshops and guidance provided to practitioners have been appreciated.
- Emerging early findings are being used to influence change. For example, the 'Social work Students with Dyslexia' project has produced a 'Good Practice Guide' for educators supporting social work students on placement. This is being shared at the regional conference for Practice Educators. The 'Race, racism, and social work' project initial findings have been shared with the Team Managers' network group to inform good practice when interviewing and selecting candidates for social work posts.

Some barriers have of course remained:

- Not all regional partners are represented in planning, driving and undertaking research.
- Not all senior leaders are supportive of practitioners undertaking research.
- There are some tensions between committing to a research project and day to day work.
- There are some competing priorities and demands in academic and social work workforces.

Implications for Social Work

Taken together these reflections indicate that a deliberate focus on practitioner research has had personal, professional and collective benefits. It has created a forum for social work practitioners' research ideas to be brought to life and established a direct pathway for researchers to share findings with social workers and broader audiences. The implications for social work are that by coordinating interested parties through networking frameworks like SWTPs, research can be supported with relatively small financial investments. It is relevant to note, however, that the

funding streams supporting our initial three years have reduced as national Teaching Partnership funding injections have decreased and we have no guarantee of a research funding source beyond 2023. If policymakers are serious about supporting social workers to engage in research throughout their career, there is a need for consistent and sustainable funding of practitioner research. If other SWTPs develop research hubs, we would encourage ongoing evaluation, including longitudinal examinations of impacts and exploration of how hubs could feed into larger (cross-institutional) bids to national research councils.

Conclusion

As Social work has become increasingly sophisticated, research has become more critical, helping to determine needs and evaluate practice, yet practitioners do not always see its value (Alston and Bowles 2020). Practitioner-researchers can bridge the research-practice 'disconnect' (Teater 2017) given their knowledge of what questions to ask, yet they often lack training, confidence and the structural support to carve time from busy workplaces. When practitioners are supported to engage with research it can increase professional skills, reflective learning and critical skills (Dahlberg and McCaig 2010; Newman and McNamara 2016), whilst building learning organisations and stronger professional identities (Boddy, Daly, and Munch 2012; Gordon, Rixon, and Cooper 2017).

As accounts of such initiatives are often lacking (Mitchell, Lunt, and Shaw 2010), we have outlined one approach to nurturing practitioner research. In a relatively short period, and impeded by a global pandemic, our initiative has established seventeen practitioner research partnerships. Some have already disseminated significant results but, as importantly, taken together they have nurtured an interest in research mindedness across our region. The research hub has created passion and excitement amongst workers, a space for support and development and joint work on tackling inequalities. Through strategies such as practitioner conferences, funding allocations,

user-friendly procedures, matching of practitioners and academics, and online resources and workshops, research became more accessible to social workers. The regional structure of the teaching partnership, with strong managerial and administrative support was an enabling factor, along with structures (e.g., research hub meetings) bringing together practitioners and researchers as equal partners.

The studies that resulted from this initiative focus on a broad range of important issues, spanning the life course from childhood, through adolescence to adulthood. Key themes included how social work education can be improved, and how lived experiences can better inform interventions. Initial results have already been disseminated through journals, public events, conferences, parliamentary evidence, and webinars and an anti-racist advocacy network has been established. Participants reflected on how the research initiative created passion and excitement, and a space to support and develop one another's ideas, share findings, and tackle inequalities. The project has not been without challenges or delays and there is a need to evaluate, review and plan as we continue, yet this commentary reveals the feasibility and value of proactively nurturing practitioner research.

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