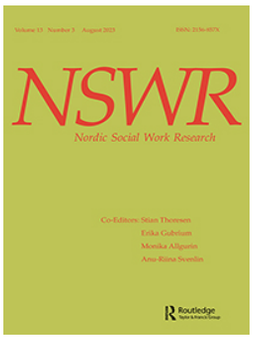

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Changes in ideas on knowledge governance in the context of social services in Sweden

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ABSTRACT

Over the past 20 years, the Swedish government and national authorities have organized a structure for knowledge governance in order to implement an evidence-based practice (EBP) for social services. Since the idea of a knowledge governance has not been implemented as expected, it was considered important to develop regional collaboration and support structures (RCSSs) as a link between national and local authorities. In this article, we discuss changes in ideas on knowledge governance at the national level, and also changes in expectations on RCSSs function in knowledge governance of the Swedish social service. Changes in governance also change the prerequisites for implementation of EBP. Therefore, it is important to further examine and analyse ideas on knowledge governance at the national level and whether they change over time. The empirical data consists of official documents and interviews with representatives of key actors at national level. A qualitative content analysis of the interviews was then performed and also an analysis of the official document was used to describe the changes on knowledge governance. This article shows that ideas on knowledge governance has changed over time, from an emphasis on top-down governance towards a more dialogue-based governance. This shift in governance ideals also appears to have had an impact on expectations regarding RCSSs, through an increased emphasis on their collaborative function in relation to both national and local levels. The knowledge governance and the function of the RCSSs appear to be fragile, as this collaboration is based on voluntary partnership and networks.

KEYWORDS

Knowledge governance; evidence-based practice; regional cooperation and support structures; changes in governance

Introduction

During the past 20 years, the Swedish government and national authorities have organized a structure for knowledge governance in order to implement an evidence-based practice (EBP) in social services (Jacobsson and Meeuwisse 2020). Governance usually means that one party deliberately tries to persuade another party to act in a certain way. In that sense, governance is a relational concept (Sundström 2016). According to the National Board of Health and Welfare (NBHW) and Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR), there is no established definition of knowledge governance (NBHW & SALAR 2009). However, in a Swedish context, knowledge governance is commonly defined as ' . . . a system that aims to increasingly provide an EBP in order to disseminate quality-guaranteed knowledge, which can be applied in different parts of the public sectors, and to weed out non-evidence-based or harmful practices'. (Ds, 2014, 51).

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Much has been written about EBP in the Nordic countries (c.f. Bergmark & Lundström, 2006; Foss Hansen and Rieper 2010) and according to Møller (2019) there are at least two interpretations of EBP in the literature. One that emphasizes EBP as a practice based on a balance between the best available scientific knowledge, professional expertise and users' experiences, and the other that encompasses the implementation of evidence-based guidelines and interventions. In Sweden, both strategies have been used by national actors to support the introduction of EBP (Eliasson 2014). However, in this study the main focus is not EBP itself but the system for governance that is intended to contribute to an EBP in social work.

The attempts to introduce knowledge governance have, in part, been influenced by new forms of state control of social services. As was the case in other Nordic countries, bureaucratic ideals such as hierarchical structures and formalized roles and responsibilities have been a central part of the governance of the public sector for quite some time (Styhre 2008; Sundström 2016), whilst at the same time Sweden has a long tradition of municipal autonomy with independence and freedom of action within a given framework (The Swedish Agency for Public Management 2011). Research, however, has identified the presence of a growing managerialism in the public sector (Pollit and Bouchaert 2011).

Those new public management reforms, which introduced neo-bureaucratic organizational regimes interrelated with neo-liberal ideas, have attempted to influence a number of public entities over the past 20 years. The way in which EBP was introduced in the social services in the early 2000s is an example of a 'softer' neoliberal form of governance, where evidence-based methods were launched by central institutions whilst those at the local level were not formally obliged to use these methods (Morén, Perlinski, and Blom 2015). According to the authors, the neoliberal philosophy rests on an ideological foundation where the governance takes place at a distance (remote control) by central actors setting goals and controlling through indirect procedures such as goal fulfilment or by presenting ideas (e.g. EBP) as true and legitimate.

However, knowledge governance has not yet resulted in EBP been implemented to the extent expected at national level. This has partly been considered a consequence of shortcomings in governance in that it does not sufficiently taking into account local level needs (The Swedish Agency for Public Management 2014). Consequently, the need for a change in governance has been stressed. (Ds 2014:9). In order to change the governance system, state authorities and SALAR considered Regional Collaboration and Support Structures (RCSSs) to be important regional resources linking governmental agencies and local authorities (The Swedish Agency for Public Management 2014). But which are the changes in ideas of governance and what are the expectations on the role of RCSS in knowledge governance in the social service? These issues are important to investigate further as RCSS is assumed to be an important link between national and local level in knowledge governance and thus also for how EBP is expected to be implemented in social service practice.

Previous research on the implementation of EBP in a Nordic context has not focussed on changes in governance, nor on regional actors linking functions to any greater extent. Møller (2019) states there has been a transformation of the Danish evidence agenda, from implementation of standardized evidence-based programme to the emergence of a new ideal referred to as 'knowledge-based practice' and where, for example, the hierarchy of evidence is questioned. This transformation has contributed to changed roles for actors at the national and local level, but also to EBP gaining greater legitimacy in social work practice. Hanberger et al. (2011) highlighted in relation to a pilot project in elder care, the regional conditions for knowledge development and the use of this knowledge in Sweden. According to the authors, the initiatives suffered from ill-defined points of origin and unclear communication from the national level (SALAR), doing with doubts about the aims and objectives.

Denvall and Johansson (2012) studied how the state (Ministry of Social Affairs) and SALAR wanted to implement EBP in the social services on the basis of a common agreement between these parties (the Platform Agreement) in 2010. The authors pointed out that the implementation was

based on neoliberal ideas of 'soft' governance and the regional level was expected to be an important link between the national and the local level, not least by providing support for the implementation of national guidelines, new knowledge and new methods. Johansson (2019) studied the implementation of EBP in social services in Sweden between 2009 and 2016, which was based on several common agreements between the state and SALAR (the Platform Agreements) between 2010 and 2015. According to the author, there was a clear top-down perspective on the implementation, because the authorities with primary responsibility for the implementation (SALAR and NBHW) were decision-makers, and because the regional support structures were financed through government funding. Consequently, the expectations on RCSSs during this period were largely to implement evidence-based methods.

According to Denvall, Nordesjö, and Johansson (2021) such hierarchical 'soft' forms of governance have limited potential to implement EBP because its application is determined by the local context. However, 'softer' forms of governance may have other, more network-based approaches. According to the authors we are now in a phase where the governance of the public sector may take place in more interactive forms where the state and its authorities try to govern with means such as dialogue, negotiation, cooperation and coordination of partnerships. Such network-based governance approaches have been described through different, but related concepts like 'new public governance' (cf. Osborne 2006) or 'network governance' (cf. Provan and Kenis 2008) and might be a way to deal with the shortcomings in taking into account local level needs (Denvall, Nordesjö, and Johansson 2021).

To sum up, previous research about the expectations of the role played by regional actors in knowledge governance in the area of social services is relatively scarce in a Nordic context and emphasizes their role in implementing national initiatives. Actors at the national level, the state and its authorities have a formal responsibility for knowledge governance in the social services in Sweden. Hence, their ideas substantially influence how RCSS support to the social service is carried out (The Swedish Agency for Public Management 2016) along with social work practice (Møller 2019). Consequently, changes in governance also change the prerequisites for implementation of EBP in social service practice. Therefore, it is important to further examine and analyse ideas on knowledge governance at the national level and whether changes in these ideas emerge over time.

Aim

Accordingly, the aim is to examine changes in ideas on governance on the national level regarding the implementation of EBP in social services in Sweden in general, and in expectations on the role of regional actors in particular. The questions we raised are:

- What are the motives for introducing knowledge governance in social services in Sweden?
- Have the ideas of governance regarding implementation of EBP changed on national level and if so, how?
- Have the expectations regarding the role of RCSSs in knowledge governance changed on the national level and if so, how?

The organization of knowledge governance between national and regional level

From 2008 onwards, two phases of development of the system for knowledge governance can be distinguished even if they are based on, and partly overlap each other. Regarding the relation between national and regional level, which is emphasized in this study, both phases aimed to implement EBP, and RCSS is seen as an important intermediary link between local and national level (SOU 2008:18; The Swedish Agency for Public Management 2014). RCSS exist in some form and structure in each county and often have their organizational site in regions or in different types of associations of local authorities or in R&D environments.

Despite similar purposes, there is partly different approaches in the two phases in terms of how the system is organized and how RCSS is financed. During the *first phase* (2008–2015), the Swedish Government Official Report (SOU 2008:18) formed the basis for the annual agreements (Platform agreements) concluded between 2010–2015. These Platform agreements were concluded jointly by the government (Ministry of Social Affairs) and SALAR (as representatives of the municipalities). During this phase, RCSS was largely funded by the state to build or strengthen the regional level with the task of being an intermediate link between local and national level and to support the implementation of EBP. The government operated through NBHW, which, for example, was responsible for providing treatment guidelines. (Johansson 2019). SALAR's role and responsibility was mainly to coordinate nationally initiated initiatives and to provide funds to the regional level.

Regarding the *second phase* (2014-), a committee was appointed to clarify the organization of knowledge governance (Ds 2014:9). This resulted in an ordinance (SFS 2015:155) which prescribes the formation of two advisory bodies, the National Council for Knowledge Governance (with representatives of national agencies) and the Responsible Authorities Group (with political representatives from the municipalities and regions). In addition, The Swedish Agency for Health Technology Assessment and Assessment of Social Services (SBU) was given the responsibility for technology assessments within the field of social services. Prior to the regulation, the SBU was only responsible for the medical field (Ds 2014:9).

Although NBHW had a role as representatives of the government during the first phase they have a more prominent role in the second phase. Here, they serve as a hub for knowledge governance and together with SALAR they also have a prominent role in relation to the regional level. NBHW and SALAR were commissioned to develop a model for how knowledge development should be organized, which resulted in a voluntary agreement at the national level ('the Partnership') which each county and region was given the opportunity to join (SALAR 2016). The Partnership consists of representatives of the RCSS, SALAR and NBHW, but they cooperate with other groups, e.g. the two advisory bodies mentioned above. The purpose is to contribute to increased collaboration and dialogue between actors at different levels, and by coordinating initiatives contribute to needs-adapted knowledge development and effective knowledge support (SALAR 2016).

RCSS role in the knowledge governance have been immersed through the Partnership. For example, each RCSS has signed the Partnership on behalf of the municipalities in each county. Through this organization, the actors at the national level want the dialogue with the regional and local level to have both a bottom-up and a top-down perspective. During the second phase, RCSS has no state funds for participation in knowledge governance issues (SALAR 2016).

Institutional prerequisites for knowledge governance

Social service is an example of what are usually referred to as human service organizations. Human service organizations are the types of public, non-profit, governmental and other organizations found in the social welfare sector, such as educational, health care and social care entities (Hasenfeld 1992). One characteristic of human service organizations is that people are seen as the 'raw material' that the organizations are designed to treat or change in various respects. Another feature of these entities is that they are highly dependent on the support of others for their existence and that they therefore try to connect with normative systems in their environment (Hasenfeld 1992).

Due to this dependence on their environment, these organizations have success criteria that are characterized more by adaptation to prevailing norms than by technical efficiency. This also means that their surroundings can influence the organizations and activities of social services by providing legitimate ideas. Based on new institutional theory, such beliefs are considered rationalized myths (Meyer and Rowan 1991). These myths refer to the assumption that certain activities are best suited to be performed in a certain way by certain organizations, often without this necessarily proving to be more 'effective' than other ways of doing the activity in question. In relation to the social services,

examples of legitimate conceptions can include views of knowledge, governance ideals and technologies prevailing in society. These conceptions are legitimized and disseminated by central institutions that in various ways condition and control how the social services work (Morén, Perlinski, and Blom 2015). With regard to social services, the State and its authorities can be regarded as examples of central institutions governing social services and the neoliberal forms of governance that underpinned the launch of EBP can be considered as an example of a legitimate governance ideal that is available in society.

Central to all organizations is the manner in which power is distributed, and the key factors in understanding this are positions, responsibilities and resources. Having the power to take decisions always entails a relationship (Foucault 1993), and genuine power exists when one person needs what another person has and must therefore accept the decision of the latter. Power based on position must prevail, and leaves no room for interpretation, in contrast to knowledge-based and/or persuasive authority. In the latter case, trust and loyalty are more important than a high organizational position. Having authority means being in possession of knowledge about something that is important to others, who generally accept and implement one's decisions. It is not necessarily those who hold power that confirm the validity of knowledge; it is just as much those who debate and question who validate knowledge and power (Berg 2000).

The RCSSs operate mainly through various networks, and are an important source for exchanging information and knowledge. The extent to which actors are embedded in a network obviously affects their access to information, and consequently their influence. The RCSS needs these networks to fulfil its commitments. However, these networks do not give power to act even though they can give persuasive authority through knowledge. At the same time, Sweden has a long tradition of municipal autonomy with independence and freedom of action within a given framework. This is an important principle that gives local authorities the right to decide according to their preferences and ability to implement.

Study design and data collection

This qualitative study was primarily based on official documents but interviews with representatives of national key actors in the knowledge governance of social services in Sweden constituted a complementary source. Key actors are those who have primary responsibility for the development of evidence-based social work. According to Jacobsson and Meeuwisse (2020), the SBU, the NBHW and SALAR are examples of key actors at national level. In addition, the Swedish government is considered as a key actor in this study. The government has an important role because those actors mentioned act on behalf of, or in agreement with, the Swedish government (Denvall and Johansson 2012). In addition, the processes many times is directed by official reports (Jacobsson and Meeuwisse 2020). Therefore, the Swedish government is considered as a key actor in legitimizing ideas on knowledge governance of social services in Sweden.

Data were collected within the framework of a research project aiming to investigate the role of RCSSs in knowledge governance in the social services. The official documents included 15 documents published between 2000 and 2017 and were all considered relevant in previous research and/or by representatives for national authorities regarding knowledge governance. Documents included were: (Ds 2014:9), NBHW (2000). NBHW & SALAR (2009, 2011), Platform Agreements (2010–2015), SALAR (2016, 2017), (SOU 2008:18) and The Swedish Agency for Public Management (2014, 2016). In total, these documents included 944 pages of printed text.

A qualitative semi structured interview guide was used in the interviews. The questions related to main themes such as knowledge governance, EBP, the Partnership and RCSSs, and encouraged retrospective observations and reflections even though the main focus was on the present situation.

In total, six interviews with six respondents for NBHW, SALAR and SBU were conducted. All respondents were key persons who were involved in knowledge governance within each key actor´s assignment in the knowledge governance system. Three interviews were conducted of pairs of

interviewees, with two representatives of each of the three key actors being interviewed together. In addition, three individual interviews were conducted with representatives of each of the three key actors. Those representatives who participated in the individual interviews also participated in the paired interviews. All interviews were conducted at a location selected by the respondents. The respondents were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. The paired interviews lasted between 54 and 90 minutes and the individual interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. In total, the material comprised 129 pages of written text. All interviews were conducted by members of the research team between April 2018 and June 2019.

Analysis

A qualitative content analysis of the material was carried out. A content analysis can be done inductively as well as deductively (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). In our case, the research questions were the starting point for the analysis. In addition, a starting point were that central institutions provides legitimate ideas in order to condition and control human service organizations such as social services (Meyer and Rowan 1991; Morén et al., 2015).

The analysis was inspired by Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps for thematic analysis.

As a first step, the authors separately read the interview material. The official documents were read by one of the authors.

As a second step, the material was coded and categorized based on the research questions. Regarding the *motives*, interviews and documents were examined based on what could be said to be the purpose or objective with knowledge governance. With regard to the *Ideas on governance*, the analysis had a descriptive approach in order to examine manifested meanings (Vedung 2018). The material was categorized based on organizational and procedural characteristics which are considered to relate to the various forms of governance mentioned earlier, i.e. bureaucracy, neoliberal governance and network-based governance. When it comes to the *expectations of RCSSs role*, it was investigated through descriptions of different kinds of expectations. During this step, comments were made about the condensed meaning of different text segments, but also how they related to the research questions. Preliminary notes on potential interpretations and on statements referring to what was previously described as the first or second phase of knowledge governance were written down. At this stage, the coding and categorization was undertaken by one of the authors.

After the initial coding and categorization, the codes were reviewed and refined by all authors as a third step.

As a fourth and final step, an analysis was carried out of the on the motives for knowledge governance, changes in ideas on governance regarding the implementation, and changes in expectations directed at RCSSs. The final coding scheme for the material as a whole looked as follows.

(1) Motives
    (1) Evidence-based interventions
    (2) Views on evidence
        1. Treatment effects
        2. Softened up
(2) Ideas on governance
    (1) Top-down perspective
    (2) Dialogical governance
    (3) Support and guidance
(3) Expectations on RCSS
    (1) Common expectations
        1. Knowledge dissemination
        2. Knowledge development

(2) Changes in expectations
    1. Dialogue partner
    2. Representatives

During the analysis of the interviews, Open Code, a computerized software tool for the analysis of qualitative data, was used. Using computerized tools can create a more systematic analysis and facilitate comparisons and identification of codes in the material (Davis and Meyer 2009).

Findings

The findings below are organized in accordance with the main issues investigated and with a focus on ideas at the national level regarding a) motives for knowledge governance, b) ideas on governance, and c) expectations directed to the RCSSs.

The motives

According to both documents (cf. NBHW & SALAR 2009) and interviews, the idea of knowledge governance is based on the desire to produce an EBP for the social services. Consequently, efforts by social services have needed to rest on science and proven experience to a greater extent than was previously required (NBHW & SALAR 2011; SOU 2008:18) and methods that were not evidence-based needed to be eliminated (The Swedish Agency for Public Management 2014). According to several respondents, what contributed to the idea's growth and legitimacy at the national level was investigations and reports that identified a need for an increased evidence-based social work in the social services. For example, one of the respondents referred to an Official Report of the Swedish Government (SOU 2008:18, self-report) and said it had a very strong support among actors at the national level.

Through knowledge governance, the ambition was not only to induce local level entities to acquire relevant knowledge but also to systematically document and follow up their work (NBHW & SALAR 2011; SOU 2008:18). Similar views were also expressed in the interviews. One respondent felt that the goal was to provide a more unified, effective and needs-adapted support for the local level. Two respondents believed that the primary purpose was to develop and systematize the local knowledge production through follow-up and other types of documentation.

That actors at the national level advocate evidence-based social work in the social services is not a new phenomenon as attempts to achieve this have been made since the beginning of the 21st century (NBHW 2000). Having said this, somewhat different views emerged in the interviews on what should be considered evidence-based knowledge. Some of the respondents emphasized that the evidence was primarily about effects of specific treatments, which was seen as a consequence of the state trying to govern in that direction. Some other respondents instead believed that the meaning of evidence had 'softened up' and one respondent described it as not being that 'hard core' anymore. Based on Møller (2019), there would seem to be partly differencing perspectives between representatives for different key actors on which evidence that should be part of the knowledge governance. One perspective that emphasizes the implementation of standardized evidence-based programs and one that has a broader view on evidence.

Ideas on governance

The first phase: top-down perspective

As mentioned earlier, governance through state authorities has been an important element in producing an EBP, ever since the concept was introduced. This governance has had elements of both bureaucratic ideals and neoliberal forms of government. Previous research has pointed out that the ideas of governance in relation to the Platform Agreements, mainly was based on neoliberal ideas

of 'soft' governance through procedures such as argumentation and persuasion (Denvall and Johansson 2012). However, according to both previous research (Johansson 2019) and official documents, the implementation mainly took place from a top-down perspective. The Swedish Agency for Public Management was commissioned to evaluate the knowledge governance that were based on the Platform Agreements. According to one of the evaluation reports, the heads of several national authorities considered that communication with the local level was too one-way and went from top to bottom. Therefore, major changes assumed to be required in order to adapt to the needs of social services. For such an adjustment to be realized, a change of perspective was considered necessary:

*'A so-called top-down perspective should be changed to dialogue. Otherwise, there is a risk that knowledge support will not support the professions, which in turn means that government control will not have any real impact' (*The Swedish Agency for Public Management 2016, *8*).

Here, the present idea of a top-down perspective on implementation seems to be challenged in terms of it being seen as a contributing factor to the inability to change and govern social service practice towards an increased use of scientific knowledge. The response seems to be an idea that takes its starting point in the perceived shortcomings, i.e. that the needs of local practice have not been taken into account. Therefore, it is instead by governing through dialogue together with actors at other levels that one should come to terms with the shortcomings that exist. An idea that to a greater extent than before relates to an interactive and network-based way of governing social services.

These ideas on the need for a dialogical governance between different levels also emerged in the interviews. One respondent refereed to a departmental letter (Ds 2014: 9, self-report) and said that it raised many relevant dilemmas, such as the fact that state authorities lacked a system for listening to local needs. According to that respondent, these circumstances contributed to the fact that the knowledge gained at national level did not meet local needs. Instead, several respondents felt that knowledge governance should rest on a systematic and strategic dialogue between the local and national levels.

The second phase: dialogical governance

These ideas about a system for governance through cooperation and dialogue also seem to have had an impact on the organization and the procedures of knowledge governance within the framework of the Partnership during the second phase. Although it appeared already of the 2015 Platform Agreement that a regional function had been created to facilitate contact between national and regional levels, the Partnership was seen as a development of previous initiatives and entailed a change in the organization of the system for purposes of implementation. On the basis of, for example, periodical joint consultations between parties representing national, regional and local levels on the social services need for knowledge development, it was believed that a strengthening *'Collaboration, dialogue and coordination of initiatives can contribute to needs-adapted knowledge development and more effective knowledge support'.* (SALAR 2016, 3). In other words, a system with emphasis on dialogical governance was expected to address the difficulties previously described as a consequence of a top-down perspective.

Although none of the respondents in the interviews were unequivocally opposed to 'softer' forms of governance, there were those who were hesitant as to whether it was governance in the true sense of the term. According to representatives of one key actor, the word governance refers to a situation in which one actor controls another actor. Therefore, they believed that nationally produced and compiled knowledge was about guidance rather than governance, as guidance need not necessary be followed.

Expectations directed at the RCSSs

Common expectations in both phases: knowledge dissemination and knowledge formation

Some of the expectations directed at RCSS did not emerge with the formation of the Partnership, although they had been included in the Platform Agreements. Among other things, RCSS were considered to have an important role in knowledge dissemination and knowledge formation in

relation to local actors. In May 2020, SALAR's website, 'Regional collaboration and support structures RCSS', showed that RCSS is expected to contribute to the development of an EBP that is adapted to regional and local priorities. According to SALAR's website, this could mean, among other things, gathering and disseminating knowledge to support systematic follow-up, systematic improvement efforts, implementation, as well as competence development.

The formal expectations were also largely confirmed in the interviews. A few respondents considered RCSSs to play an important role in implementing knowledge produced at the national level. Another respondent emphasized the role of the RCSSs in prioritizing the knowledge that should be implemented at the local level based on its primary needs. According to the interviews, RCSSs also play an important role in assisting the local level in their own knowledge production, e.g. to support local follow-up or what is known as 'R&D circles' as opportunities for knowledge and competence development.

The expectations directed to RCSSs expressed on SALAR's website and in the interviews, seem to be to support the implementation and use of scientific knowledge at the local level, as well as supporting the development of proven experience. Such expectations were not something new that the parties agreed to in connection with the Partnership Agreement. On the contrary, they also formed part of the Platform Agreements. The Platform Agreement from 2010 states, for example, that the regional support aims to receive *'a regional development support for the implementation of national guidelines, new knowledge and new methods'*. (Platform Agreement 2010, 6, our translation).

Changes in expectations – dialogue partner and representative of the local level

What seems to have changed in relation to the second phase, however, is a gradually increasing emphasis on RCSS as a dialogue partner and representative of the local level. Although the expectations during the time of the Platform Agreements emphasized knowledge dissemination and formation, an awareness of the importance of RCSS as a dialogue partner to the national level emerged in the agreements in 2013 and 2014. Therefore, one priority area for RCSS was considered to be to: "*Develop the conditions for a dialogue with the national level* (Platform Agreement 2014, 13). However, there seems to have been an increased emphasis and clarification on RCSS role as a dialogue partner within the framework of the Partnership (SALAR 2017). For example, RCSSs were supposed to consult with representatives of NBHW and SALAR about the social service needs. They were also supposed to participate in the creation of a common picture of the needs for knowledge development, as well as to analyse and discuss how to handle knowledge needs optimally. In addition, RCSSs were supposed to coordinate local dialogues concerning the need for support in knowledge development and to serve as representatives of municipalities vis-à-vis the national level (SALAR 2016).

The formal expectations on RCSSs as dialogue partners in the Partnership were also largely confirmed in the interviews. Several respondents stated that no individual party made decisions or had the last word without consultation taking place on equal terms. According to the respondents, this dialogue was key because RCSSs were considered to have knowledge of the needs in the field that was valuable in enabling actors at national level to produce knowledge based on the needs that exist at the local level.

The dialogical way of governance seems also to have affected opportunities for national authorities to assert formal influence in relation to the RCSSs. According to several respondents, there were no legal requirements for RCSSs in each region. Neither were there any formal requirements that they should be involved in knowledge governance nor any specification of what activities they should prioritize. For example, one respondent indicated that it was not possible to decide anything in relation to the local level, because unlike the situation that prevailed before the Partnership, the RCSSs represented and was financed by municipalities that largely governed themselves. In order for the national level to have a greater influence over the activities of RCSS, two respondents said that access to other means of pressure, such as regulations or funding, would be required. Clearly,

without pressures such as regulations or state funding as were the case during the Platform Agreements, national authorities do not have formal influence over either the existence of RCSS or their activities.

Discussion

This paper discusses changes in ideas concerning governance with respect to the system for implementation of EBP in Swedish social services, in general, with a focus on the expectations on RCSSs, in particular. Our findings show that the ideas of governance, as well as of the expectations placed on RCSSs, seems to have changed over time, not least at the national level.

As mentioned earlier, neoliberal forms of governance have exerted influence in recent years, not least in the field of social services (Morén, Perlinski, and Blom 2015). Examples of neoliberal governance can also be seen in this study. For example, knowledge governance seems to be based mainly on indirect control that is not compulsory, but rather is based on voluntary agreements. It also appears that contributing causes of the voluntary activity seem to be both the relatively high level of municipal autonomy that characterizes the Nordic model, as well as the absence of formal pressure. It can therefore be said that the local level has a considerable influence on how, and to what extent, an EBP in social services is realized as a consequence of knowledge governance. RCSSs do not occupy a position that enables them to unilaterally decide matters. Instead, they have knowledge-based and/or persuasive authority and must therefore convince social services, with professional social workers, that what they suggest (e.g. an EBP) has been validated by different networks as being based on professionalism and knowledge, and should therefore be implemented.

What can be seen, however, is that the ideas of knowledge governance also appear to change from an emphasis on neoliberal ideas, in the direction of more interactive strategies and dialogue (cf. Denvall, Nordesjö, and Johansson 2021). Given this approach, knowledge governance shows elements of what is termed 'new public governance', in which a number of mutually dependent actors contribute to the provision of services. Consequently, interorganizational relationships and trust, relational capital and relational contracts are key control mechanisms (Osborne 2006). In this, New Public Governance can be regarded as an accessible governance ideal, a rationalized myth that is legitimized by central institutions that condition and control social work in social service, and which mainly expressed through public inquiries and regulatory structures such as ordinances and joint declarations of partnership. (cf. Meyer and Rowan 1991).

This change also seems to affects expectations on the RCSSs, more specifically regarding the increased emphasis on the role of RCSSs as an intermediate link between the national and local levels (cf. Smedlund 2006). This role as intermediary seems to be based on collaboration and dialogue between stakeholders at different levels and with different tasks, rather than on remote control or a hierarchical governance where national actors define the knowledge needs in the social service practice, which was the case during the phase before the Partnership (Johansson 2019). Neither the national actors nor the regional actors have the power to force the social services to work in certain ways. Instead, they need to rely on their knowledge-based and/or persuasive authority so that they can convince social services professionals to implement the information and knowledge.

Governance through dialogue and partnership – who is in control?

The attempts by national key actors to implement EBP in the social services have been through more neoliberal forms of governance in which actors at the local level monitor themselves rather than being monitored through usual hierarchical control structures (Bergmark & Lundström, 2006). These ambitions can be interpreted as an endeavour to legitimize a knowledge system through mechanisms, such as normalization and accreditation (Brass 2000). However, the ambitions of legitimization do not appear to have resulted in EBP being implemented to the extent

expected by national level (The Swedish Agency for Public Management 2014; DS 2014: 9). As stated in this study, the objective therefore seems to have been to achieve a governance in which continuous dialogue would be an important element, not least in order to adapt national knowledge production and support to local needs. As such, governance through continuous dialogue may be a way to ensure that goals, activities and effects are in harmony and that different stakeholders have been given the opportunity to influence decisions (SOU 2018:47).

At the same time, however, there is a risk that a dialogue-based knowledge governance can become fragile. Like neoliberal forms of governance, dialogue-based governance implies a less formal influence for central institutions. Accordingly, the influence from central institutions is dependent on the arguments advanced and the extent to which knowledge produced or compiled by state authorities responds to perceived needs at the local level. This implies that power and influence in respect of knowledge governance can be formed in negotiations between mutually dependent actors at national, regional and local levels (cf. Grape 2001). Thus, knowledge governance may become more temporary and unstable given that the influence of different parties may change depending on their strength and opportunity to oppose (cf. Hjelte 2005).

In addition, with dialogue-based governance there is a risk that it will be more difficult to know the identity of different actors having an influence over the knowledge governance of social services, and the basis for that influence. Johansson (2012) believes that the change that has taken place towards softer forms of governance, for example via collaborative networks, partnerships and self-regulation, has often led to unclear demarcations of the boundaries between various areas of responsibility. Since political intentions are created through interactions between a number of actors rather than through formalized structures, the power and influence of different actors also becomes invisible and diffuse (Johansson 2012). Given the risks of uncertainty, it may be worth asking the question of who is actually governing and who is being governed within the framework of a dialogue-based knowledge governance of social services.

Implications for practice

The results in this study indicate that the prevailing governance ideal appears to affect the nature of the expectations directed at RCSSs with regard to knowledge governance. This means that it is reasonable to assume that expectations of regional actors will change if the knowledge and governance ideal changes. Such implications also indicate that it is important to describe clearly the prevailing knowledge and governance ideal in order to be able to plan and legitimize regional actors' role in knowledge governance in a transparent way. The results also indicate that it may be necessary to clarify responsibilities and implications for a dialogue-based governance. Without this clarification, governance may be fragile and difficult to predict because it depends on the will of different actors, as well as their often nebulous influence. As a result, neither party can be held responsible for the outcome of knowledge governance. The key actors appear to have different definitions in respect of EBP, which indicates that they can have different aims and maybe motives for implementing EBP in social services. However, we have not explored these differences for the purposes of this paper, an issue we are considering for a future article.

Limitations and further research

This study has focused attention on expectations vis-à-vis RCSSs in knowledge governance at the national level in relation to social services in Sweden. The empirical material covers official documents and with a limited number of interviews with representatives of key actors as a complementary source. The complementary role of the interviews may entail a risk that the dynamics in the field are not fully visible.

Another limitation is that the study only examined ideas at the national level. Collaborative and dialogue-based governance, where power relations are not stable and explicit presupposes that there is consensus between the national and regional levels as to how knowledge governance should be organized and implemented. Consequently, one issue for further research is an examination of how actors at the regional level experience the organization of knowledge governance, as well as their thoughts regarding the consequences of the practical implementation.

In addition, this study also shows a movement from hierarchical forms of governance towards those that give the local level a major say on knowledge production and the use of knowledge. Given this approach, the new ideals appear to indicate that the Swedish variant of EBP is approaching the Anglo-Saxon variants, which are more bottom-up (Bergmark & Lundström, 2006). As this study does not include representatives of the local level, it would be of interest for further research to draw attention to the local level actor's ideas of knowledge governance, production and use of knowledge. What are their views on how knowledge governance should be organized and implemented, and what knowledge does the local level need? An examination of these issues appears to be crucial if dialogue-based knowledge governance is to have a significant practical effect on social service practice.

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