

# Need for Knowledge—What, Where and How? How Social Workers Handle Service and Support for Individuals with Disability

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## Abstract

This article investigates the need and sources of knowledge among LSS administrators in Sweden (i.e. social workers handling service and support for individuals with disability according to the Swedish Disability Act [LSS]). Changing and challenging working conditions and issues concerning professional status warrant the aim. A questionnaire distributed via gatekeepers in a number of municipalities demonstrated that knowledge about 'disability', 'law', 'ethics' and 'augmentative and alternative communication' was rated highly. This result is particularly interesting given that many social work education programmes do not have compulsory courses in disability. Colleagues appear to be relied upon as essential sources of support and knowledge, but the knowledge sharing seems unorganised. Findings are discussed in relation to communities of practice (CoP) and shows that, due to the lack of essential knowledge from formal education and the strong dependence on colleagues, a locally developed praxis might be established. Inadequate theoretical and research-based knowledge, together with this local praxis knowledge, may result in the LSS administrators' work becoming inadequate. A specialist education in disability studies is proposed as a prerequisite for being employed as an LSS administrator, and the inclusion of a theoretical and scientific framework in the regular CoP interaction is also recommended.

**Keywords:** communities of practice, disability, knowledge need, situated learning, social worker

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## Introduction

Being a social worker means being in a profession. What characterises an academic profession is, among other things, its foundation in and its requirements of theoretical schooling through a university education and subsequent degrees (e.g. Millerson, 1998; Evetts, 1999; Freidson, 1999). The Swedish academic education in social work, which is aimed at supporting those requirements and preparing students for employment in a broad field, could today be seen as a generalist education (Tham and Lynch, 2021). Thus, a number of classic social work areas, such as elderly care and disability, are studied to varying degrees in Sweden as well as in other countries (Föreningen Social Omsorg, 2020; Richards *et al.*, 2014). Also, possibly following a societal trend (Shipman and Shipman, 2016), social work education has become the subject of academisation, with, for example, courses in research methods partly replacing field practice (Tham and Lynch, 2014). Social work education usually leads to work as professional administrators within municipalities' support and services, and therefore, exercise a certain amount of public authority. A clear trend is the specialisation and ensuing concentration of knowledge in the public sector, where the handling of cases is organised in different fields, for example, with administrators specialising in the support and services for persons with disability (e.g. Shanks, 2016). The generalist orientation on the educational level therefore stands in stark contrast to this professional specialisation. So, if theoretical education and degrees do not, or only partly, promote learning related to, for example, disability, how and where can this knowledge be acquired instead? And what areas of knowledge are considered necessary for the administrators to be able to carry out their work?

This study aims to gain a deeper understanding of the need for knowledge experienced by LSS administrators (i.e. social workers handling service and support for individuals with disability in Sweden), according to the Swedish Disability Act (SFS 1993:387) (LSS). More specifically, the objective is to show what kind of knowledge is needed, where the knowledge is acquired, and how training and reflection are internally supported. Findings are discussed in relation to situated learning and communities of practice (CoP) (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

## Knowledge and knowledge supply

Studies exploring learning and the application of knowledge among social workers have dealt with categorisations of knowledge, such as

research-based knowledge, practice-based knowledge and ordinary knowledge (Avby *et al.*, 2017), internal and external knowledge (Iversen and Heggen, 2016) and theoretical, factual and practical knowledge (Trevithick, 2008). However, a vast majority of those studies are performed within the sphere of children and family, whereas the area of disability has been much less researched. The field of knowledge related to the tasks of LSS administrators, has thus not been studied and problematised. The need to shed light on their situation with regard to knowledge is emphasised by several factors, such as universities offering programmes that educate generalists, which may lack essential education about disability. Students claim they are unprepared for working life (Tham and Lynch, 2014), and in addition, stakeholders and official reports question LSS administrators' competence and knowledge. The specific knowledge not imparted by formal education must be obtained at the workplace. This is also what the graduating social work students state, namely, that support is expected to be given by experienced colleagues and by managers (Tham and Lynch, 2014). Therefore, it seems essential for the LSS administrators' workplace to function as a CoP with situated learning and where knowledge is shared in a group. The theory of situated learning and CoP highlights social and cultural learning processes and is a critique of conventional theories of learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Lave, 2008; O'Brien and Battista, 2020). A CoP is characterised by the combination of three elements, all of them valid for an LSS workplace: *the domain*, as in, having an interest in common; *the community*, where members engage and interact as well as share information and learn together; and *the practice*, which means that members are practitioners and share a practice (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

## Being an LSS administrator

The study of LSS administrators' unexplored knowledge situation demands a background description of their changing and challenging working conditions. Like other social workers, LSS administrators are situated at the intersection of the organisation and the profession as well as between the organisation and the person applying for support and service and, therefore, they are so-called 'street-level bureaucrats' (Lipsky, 1980/2010). LSS administrators in the Swedish social services work in an organisation governed by law, governmental directives and municipal politicians. The responsibility for the exercise of authority thus exists within the organisation, and the administrators are accountable to the authority as well as being those that independently carry out

the investigations. The Swedish Disability Act (SFS 1993:387) (LSS)<sup>1</sup> is the core of governing documents, and it has in its initial provision three target groups comprising individuals with extensive and permanent disability: First, persons with intellectual disabilities and persons with autism or conditions similar to autism; secondly, persons with significant and permanent intellectual functional disabilities following brain damage as an adult; and thirdly, persons who, as a result of other serious and permanent functional disabilities that are clearly not the result of normal ageing, have considerable difficulties in everyday life and are in great need for support or service. The LSS contains ten different interventions (e.g. personal assistance, daily activity centres and companion service for those who meet the eligibility criteria). It is a rights law aimed at guaranteeing good living conditions and the possibility to ‘live like others’, and it obliges the municipality to distribute the interventions to those that meet the indicated requirements.

After receiving an application from an individual, the municipality is responsible for investigating and assessing that person’s need for support and service. The investigation starts by determining whether the person fulfils the prerequisites for belonging to one of the target groups. This investigation should be characterised by a clear user orientation (Prop. 2016/17: 188), and it can thus be argued that thorough knowledge about impairment and disability and the consequences of these in relation to a life situation is essential. The need for support and service is often life-long but inevitably involves change and adaptation and, therefore, the administrator should be able to work with persons of different ages. Knowledge about available support and its possibilities for providing good quality of life and full participation may thus be seen as crucial. Moreover, knowledge about legislation, and its application, is a prerequisite. Here, the LSS administrators may consult a municipal lawyer, if such is employed, or other legal aid. The investigation may encompass both interviews with and observations of the applicant, the collection of certificates from a range of actors, such as school, workplace, healthcare centres, and the initiation of medical as well as paramedical examinations in order to ascertain the need for support and service from a holistic perspective. The LSS administrators are thus dependent on a well-functioning cooperation with other professions and activities. The complex and often time-consuming assessment will result in a decision about the application for support. In the case of rejection, a decision may be appealed to an administrative court.

Depending on what decision mandate the LSS administrators have, they make certain decisions themselves and other decisions are made by

1 The LSS is based on the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) and later adapted to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006), ratified by Sweden in 2008, and to national disability policies (Prop. 2016/17, p. 188).

managers and/or a local political board. This is the space, characterised by legal and organisational conditions, in which the administrators work.

## The challenges of the profession

Being a social worker often entails challenging working conditions in terms of stress, risk of burnout, high work demands, role conflicts and limited possibilities to influence decisions (Travis *et al.*, 2016; Tham, 2018; Jönsson, 2019; Astvik *et al.*, 2020). However, being an LSS administrator may include additional challenges. As mentioned, the LSS legislation is a rights law intended to have a generous application (Larsson, 2008). Nevertheless, the initial intention of the legislation has, over the last few years, been subject to reinterpretation, demonstrated by, for example, austerity in needs assessments (Dir 2016, p. 40) and a stricter legal application (Altermark, 2017), leading to criticism from different stakeholders (e.g. Järkestig Berggren *et al.*, 2021; Funktionsrådet Sverige, 2020). Several municipal decisions made by LSS administrators are appealed in court, resulting in verdicts that in some sense will become precedents for future investigations and decisions, which means that not only is the legal influence on the individual LSS administrator increasing but also the demand for legal competence. LSS administrators have also been questioned in their profession, both by national authorities and in research (Socialstyrelsen, 2007; Hultman *et al.*, 2018) with respect to their level of competence and their knowledge regarding the complex living conditions of those with disability. Moreover, handling applications for support and service requires occasionally challenging cooperation with a range of different professions and organisations (Jonhed and Bennich, 2018). Thus, the LSS administrators perform their work under a multitude of specific and constantly changing demands and prerequisites.

## Method

A cross-sectional survey was made using an online questionnaire that included closed and open-response questions. The questionnaire was customised to support exploration of an under-considered research topic: the circumstances and challenges that LSS administrators may experience. The survey design allowed respondents to answer the questionnaire at a time of their own choosing, which, in a possibly stressful work situation, was expected to favour a high response rate. Furthermore, the questionnaire was refined in a pilot study with eight LSS administrators in different municipalities.

In late 2018, the questionnaire and three reminders were distributed to twenty-seven heads of seventeen administrations in eight Swedish

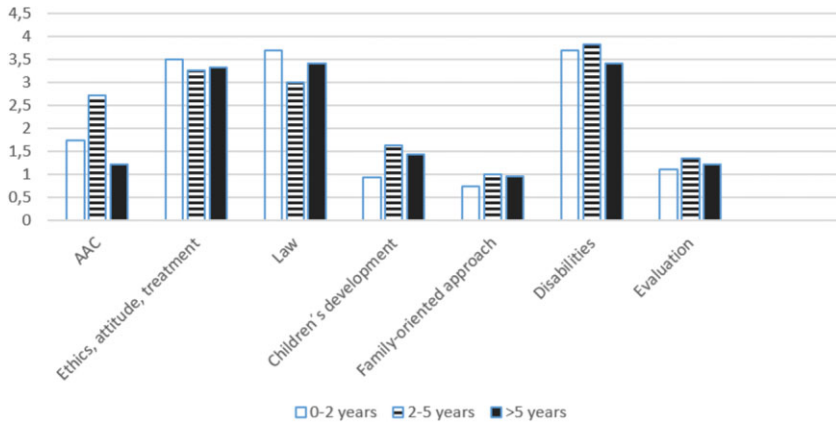
municipalities that had not participated in the pilot study. The municipalities were chosen strategically in order to obtain a wide distribution regarding geographical location, population size, average income and political majority. The authors had not had any previous contact with the administrations involved in the study. The heads of administration were asked to forward the questionnaire via a web link to the LSS administrators concerned and to inform the authors of how many administrators they had distributed it to.

There were positive responses from seven heads of administration, distributed in five municipalities, and the questionnaire was forwarded to seventy-seven LSS administrators, with the number of administrators per head of administration varying between one and twenty-one. In total, fifty-four questionnaires were handed in, and thereby the response rate among the LSS administrators tentatively amounted to seventy per cent (54/77). It is not possible to indicate the response rate in relation to the total number of LSS administrators in the chosen municipalities, as that number is not known.

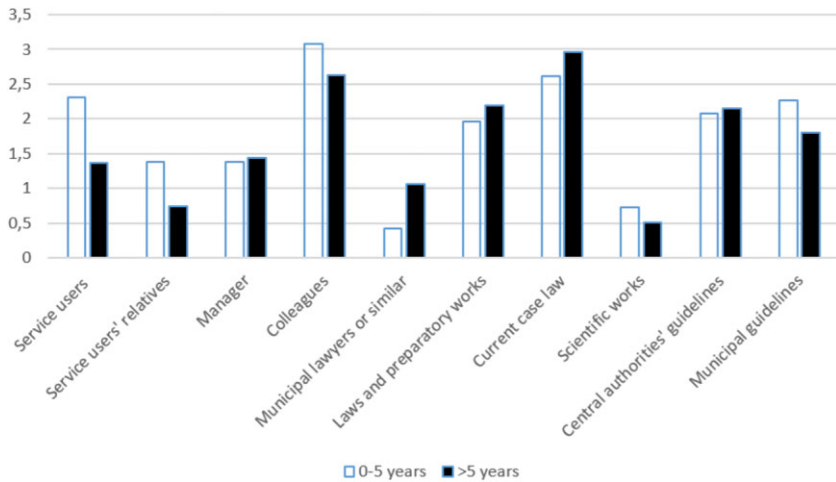
The questionnaire was created in a survey system (Sunet Survey & Report 4.3) and was anonymous. It comprised thirty-three items related to various aspects of the respondents' work situation and included background variables (education, number of years as an LSS administrator, professional title). In this study, we use part of the questionnaire (thirteen items) to fulfil the aim of gaining a deeper understanding of LSS administrators' knowledge situation. The rest of the questionnaire focused on daily work and how cooperation with different stakeholders, including the individual with disability, is experienced. Furthermore, respondents were asked to describe good and bad working situations and make suggestions about improvements.

For the question, 'What knowledge do you need in your work?', the respondents were asked to rank the five most important of the eight options proposed (including 'others', [Figure 1](#)). In rating the question, 'How do you seek knowledge?', the respondents were asked to rank the five most important of the eleven options proposed (including 'others', [Figure 2](#)). The question, 'How were you introduced to your work tasks?' had six proposed alternatives ('going next door', 'mentorship', 'colleagues', 'manager', 'teamwork', 'other—specify'), and one or several of them could be chosen. Similarly, the question, 'Who can you get support and feedback from in your work?', had six proposed answer options ('manager', 'colleagues', 'supervisor', 'municipal lawyer', 'mentor', 'politicians'). For all of the questions, it was possible to add free comments regardless of the chosen answer.

Furthermore, using the ordinal scale referred to above, the respondents were asked to rank qualitative variables, where 1 = most important, 2 = second most important, up to 5. Rank 1 gave rating 5, Rank 2 gave rating 4, etc., while Rank 5 gave rating 1, etc., and options not ranked



**Figure 1:** The LSS administrators' expressed need for knowledge, in relation to how long they have worked in their current position or with similar tasks (rating scale 0–5,  $N=54$ ).



**Figure 2:** The LSS administrators' sources of knowledge and number of years in their current position (rating scale 0–5,  $N=54$ ).

among the top 5 gave a rating of 0. For each answer option, the arithmetic average of the respondents' rating was calculated.

The quantitative analyses were performed using the IBM SPSS Statistical software package (v 24; IBM SPSS, Armonk, NY, USA). Attempts were made with Chi-square analysis, but due to limited data, few significant correlations emerged, and therefore, only frequency data are reported. To obtain a deeper understanding of the results, the qualitative data were analysed using a content analysis approach. The free comments were gathered into meaningful units with themes identified to

support comparison and to add depth and meaning to quantitative findings (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004; Elo *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, for example, the research question, ‘How were you introduced to your work tasks?’, where one of the answers was ‘You had to ask colleagues or come up with your own solution’ led to a subtheme: ‘colleagues introduce’. The result of that particular question will be presented under the heading ‘Getting into the work’. The content of the free comments relevant to the other questions was analysed in a corresponding way.

## Ethical considerations

The survey was conducted in accordance with the Swedish law on ethical review (SFS 2003, p. 460) and the General Data Protection Regulation. As no sensitive personal data were collected and the survey was anonymous, no ethical review was required. Permission was obtained from the heads of administration in connection with their distribution of the questionnaire. In the questionnaire, information was given to the participants about the aim of the study and about the study being voluntary and anonymous, which also meant that their answers could not be traced to a certain municipality. Filling in the questionnaire implied simultaneously giving one’s informed consent. Questions that could entail the risk of disclosure of personal data were avoided.

## Results

Most of the respondents have a degree in social work, while those who did not had instead studied sociology, psychology and social pedagogy. ‘Social worker’ was the professional title that most of the respondents used. Other professional titles were ‘LSS administrator’, ‘senior social worker’ and ‘social assistance officer’. Half of the respondents stated that they had worked for more than five years, while the other half had worked for a varying period of between one and five years.

## What knowledge?

When asked what knowledge is necessary in the work and how important it is, the respondents valued knowledge about ‘disabilities and their consequences’ highly, followed by ‘law’ and ‘ethics, attitude and treatment’. Another important area of knowledge was ‘Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)’ (Figure 1).

It is worth noting that a large proportion of the LSS administrators only work with adults and therefore probably rate knowledge about



family-oriented working methods and children's development low. Regarding AAC, thirty-five individuals (65 percent) say that they need AAC in their work; however, only a few state that they have competence in the field, and one person does not know what it is.

Not anything that we have gone over or received training in. There are requests for it (Respondent 1).

One person mentioned the dependence on relatives and assistants when it comes to communication and believes that if the LSS administrators had training in AAC, they could communicate directly with the service user. It also appears that the LSS administrators have made their own pictorial support (a graphic communication method) and that they can communicate through body language.

Figure 1 shows that the evaluation of different areas of competence does not seem to be much affected by the number of years spent in the current job. The respondents express not only a lack of time for both competence development and implementation of new knowledge but also that some knowledge is difficult to come by or grasp because it is not explicit.

.../ There's much 'tacit knowledge' today. Learning by doing. It's frustrating and complicates my work (Respondent 19).

## Where to find knowledge?

When asked where they searched for knowledge, the respondents had the possibility to choose between eleven sources. They mentioned colleagues, service users or case law as the most important sources. Many also rated municipal guidelines, laws and preparatory works, as well as central authorities' guidelines and decision support, among the five most important sources. Slightly fewer rated a manager, relatives, municipal lawyers and scientific works among the five most important sources. LSS administrators with more than five years in their current position tended to rate sources of law, such as municipal lawyers, precedents and legal and preparatory works, somewhat higher, and service users, relatives and colleagues somewhat lower as sources of knowledge (Figure 2).

The free comments indicate that different sources of knowledge, and thus different kinds of knowledge, must be understood in relation to each other and to the specific functions that are part of the LSS administrators' duties. It would seem, for example, that the respondents distinguish *knowledge* from the *information* they get from the service user.

.../ Knowledge needed to make correct assessments, that is, knowledge I need to handle the information I've obtained from service users and relatives to arrive at a fair assessment of their right to support (Respondent 30).

Economic factors both directly and indirectly affect the extent to which the LSS administrators can develop their knowledge. The municipalities may not have the resources for competence development for their personnel, and time schedules in the administrators' daily work are tight. Often, knowledge is about being able to make legal decisions that concern the individual service user, and, in a harsh economic reality, colleagues rely on each other's knowledge.

There's no time in working hours to seek knowledge in research (!). [...] We are referred to the municipality's one-day lectures that take place if there's space in the budget (Respondent 6).

## Getting into the work

Finding time to seek knowledge and collegial support can be important, both during the introductory phase and later in the daily work. Many of the respondents had been trained for their tasks by colleagues, through mentorship, or by 'going next door'. Managers contribute to the introduction to a lesser extent, usually in combination with other colleagues. A few of the respondents say that a 'social worker in a senior position' also contributed. Some say that induction was lacking, and one person mentions that induction took place through colleagues but without there being any plan for it. A couple of respondents describe their own reading of governing documents as part of the training. Some of the LSS administrators had also been trained through internships. Of the respondents answering 'Other', two stated that the induction to the work was completely missing, and one mentioned a collegial network.

Quotations from the respondents show that the support varied and was mainly given by colleagues. Sometimes the tasks were considered well known and therefore no induction to the work was needed.

I've worked for so many years that, in my time, it was just a matter of throwing oneself into work, [...]. Didn't get to go next door and got no introduction.

You had to ask your colleagues, and if they didn't know, you had to try to come up with a solution yourself (Respondent 8).

## Support and time for reflection

Time and space for reflection occur in some form in most cases, but not always. Among the respondents, forty-six (87 per cent) state that they have room for reflection with colleagues, forty-three (81 per cent) state that they engage in reflection together with professional supervisors, thirty-seven (70 per cent) have time for self-reflection, twenty-seven (51

per cent) have reflection time together with a manager, and three LSS administrators lack room for reflection. Reflection with colleagues, self-reflection and reflection with the boss tend to all go hand in hand. However, time for reflection in one's daily work decreases with an increasing workload:

You have to take that time. It doesn't really exist (Respondent 7).

Self-reflection and [reflecting] with colleagues and the manager [is something] I myself have to find time for (Respondent 37).

At the same time, external supervision occurs to some extent and is recurring and appreciated.

We have process supervision every three weeks with an external supervisor and method supervision once a week in the working group (Respondent 37).

Almost everyone says they can get support and feedback about their work from colleagues, and many also get it from a manager and a supervisor. Some may receive feedback from, for example, a municipal lawyer or another lawyer, a mentor or a senior social service worker or, more rarely, politicians or colleagues in other units.

## Discussion

This study analyses the need, as well as the sources, of knowledge among LSS administrators in Sweden and explores the exercise of authority for persons with disability. LSS administrators highly rate knowledge about 'disability', 'law', 'ethics' and 'augmentative and alternative Communication'. Time is lacking for both competence development and the implementation of new knowledge. Colleagues appear to be essential as sources of knowledge, and the manager seems to play only a minor role in both the planning and the execution of the skills supply. In addition, it appears that knowledge is shared in unorganised ways and depends on individual initiatives and the goodwill of colleagues.

Handling LSS cases requires a range of knowledge in different areas, as demonstrated by the result. Due to the complicated and changeable prerequisites, knowledge of the law is, as expected, highly rated, and knowledge about disability in particular is the highest-rated knowledge need among the LSS administrators in this study. This result is of special interest, considering that social work education often does not have compulsory courses in disability (Föreningen Social Omsorg, 2020). The Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen, 2007) points out that municipalities frequently employ social workers as administrators and that the requirement of a specific education is less pronounced within the disability field than in other fields. The differing educational backgrounds of the respondents in this study also make it

likely that some of them have not been able to take courses in disability within their education programme. Knowledge about different disabilities and their consequences, medically, as well as in daily life, is a huge area. This could also be seen as the core knowledge, given that the handling of LSS cases takes its point of departure in the needs of the individual. Hence, assessments must be based on an understanding of individual, environmental and social aspects of 'good living conditions', in terms of an understanding of the full implications of the law. Even though the LSS administrator cooperates with a range of specialists, using doctors' certificates and the investigations of other specialists such as occupational therapists, psychologists and teachers, the ability to understand and evaluate their assessments demands knowledge about the disability. Without such knowledge, the final decision may be based on incorrect grounds. [Hultman et al. \(2019\)](#) describe a situation where a social worker included a child in a meeting, as part of an LSS investigation, and relied on knowledge of the level of understanding of non-disabled children rather than that of a child with a disability.

Knowledge of AAC was considered desirable by the respondents. Furthermore, social workers' need for improved communication skills with non-verbal children and adults is widely recognised ([Prynallt-Jones et al., 2018](#); [Engwall and Hultman, 2020](#)). This is in line with our results, where more than half of the respondents state that they do not have knowledge of AAC. However, the diversity of the perceived need is striking, with some claiming that it is quite simple to understand and interpret a person's body language and use of pictorial support, while others argue that there is still much to learn.

Communicative competence can be different with different people and in different situations and activities. In their professional practice, the LSS administrators meet people with extensive disabilities and varying communicative abilities, with whom it is common to use non-verbal communication. The signals, sounds and gestures that may constitute a person's communication repertoire could be easily overlooked or misunderstood by the LSS administrator. AAC can be performed in different ways and with different devices and requires knowledge of how and when it should be used ([Tegler, 2020](#)). Such knowledge seems to be deficient among LSS administrators, which might lead to essential information being missed, and as a result, the basis for decisions is incomplete ([Engwall and Hultman, 2020](#)). Therefore, the LSS administrators need education, training and support in AAC to become competent and challenging communication partners ([Beukleman and Miranda, 1998](#)).

The sources of knowledge range from colleagues and liaisons with different stakeholders to more formal documents and legislation. The results indicate that the LSS administrators consider the reading of scientific research too time-consuming to be accommodated in practice, which confirms what previous research has shown over many years (e.g.

Harrison *et al.*, 2004; Flanagan, 2020). Scientific results may also be perceived as divergent, inconsistent or even lacking relevance for the LSS investigation (Avby *et al.*, 2017). This may indicate a conflict between the research base of the profession and the development of an instrumental rationality in the organisational context.

Colleagues appear to be highly important for the LSS administrators, both as sources of knowledge during their induction to the work and as support in their work and providers of feedback. Iversen and Heggen (2016) found that colleagues were important not only for ‘new’ social workers but also later on, irrespective of working experience. Flanagan (2020) highlights that receiving a correct and rapid response to a question or need, and knowledge that is adapted to fit the need or question, is often more valued than more time-consuming ways of self-education. Previous research in other areas within social work has also shown that colleagues are crucial for knowledge sharing (e.g. Harrison *et al.*, 2004; Björkenheim, 2007; Tham and Lynch, 2014; Avby *et al.*, 2017). The importance of colleagues is further emphasised when graduating social work students are asked about their competence and skills. They claim that they are unprepared for social work positions and that they expect and will need ‘induction, support and supervision at the workplace’ (Tham and Lynch, 2019, p. 407).

The sharing of information, advice and insights, and the sharing of knowledge and learning according to a form of common expertise in the LSS administrators’ workplace can be related to the practice in situated learning. The workplace then fulfils the criteria for being a CoP with a common domain of interest, a community of interaction and a shared practice (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015). The cooperation around an investigation shows that a CoP exists where colleagues solve problems together in the specific LSS area and in the specific investigation context (Nordlander, 2006).

However, this dependence on colleagues as sources of knowledge must be scrutinised. Half of the respondents had worked as LSS administrators for less than five years, which may indicate that experienced and easily accessible colleagues able to give applicable practice knowledge could be challenged as one of the main knowledge sources. Furthermore, not all LSS administrators have colleagues. Small municipalities may only have one LSS administrator, and the chance to consult and discuss with others may not exist at the workplace. Moreover, studies have shown the difficulties in recruiting LSS administrators (Tham and Meagher, 2009; Socialstyrelsen, 2020).

## Community of practice

The possibility to share knowledge and learning at the workplace, according to the objective of a CoP, is challenged when the social

worker is expected to start handling LSS cases from day one after their basic education and when the competence supply takes place alongside the work. Having a generalist education presupposes that there is an opportunity to acquire the specific skills required for doing one's work and getting an adequate induction to the work; however, previous research shows that this seldom happens (Tham and Lynch, 2019, 2021). Formalised induction programmes to the profession seem to be lacking, and instead, colleagues will serve as introducers.

Surprisingly, the manager appears to have an invisible role in both the planning and the execution of the skills supply. The presumed strategic plan is replaced by informal collegiality, and if the economy allows for it, a one-day education. Therefore, much of the knowledge sharing seems to happen in an unorganised way and is highly contingent on individual initiatives and the goodwill of colleagues.

A CoP could mean that a locally developed practice persists. The downside of situated learning is that theoretical research-based knowledge, as well as knowledge from sources of law, risk being obscured by local praxis knowledge. The connection to colleagues also implies that the knowledge is transferred verbally and that a strong verbal culture will be established (Harrison *et al.*, 2004; Flanagan, 2020), standing in contrast to research, which is typically a written source. Iversen and Heggen (2016) argue that if social workers rely heavily on colleagues as their knowledge source, knowledge will be too static and a practice of 'this is how we do it here' could be the result.

Service users, and to some extent, their relatives, are also valued as sources of knowledge. However, it can be assumed that this transfer of knowledge is not mutual but rather unilateral and does not happen in an interactive way. The learning is thereby not to be considered as going on in a CoP, which postulates active, mutual sharing of knowledge.

The crucial question that remains to be answered is, what knowledge should be taught and learnt at university and what knowledge should be obtained at the workplace? Also, questions arise as to how the latter knowledge transfer should be organised.

## Limitations

Overall, the questionnaire answers cannot be assumed to be representative of all LSS administrators in all Swedish municipalities. For practical reasons related to the fact that there are no national lists of LSS administrators, the heads of administration were given the role of gatekeepers. The consequent non-response rate on the municipal and administrative levels was considerable but relatively evenly distributed with regard to the municipal characteristics that had constituted the selection criteria. Only seven of twenty-seven managers gave a positive response and

forwarded the questionnaire to LSS administrators, among whom, fifty-four out of seventy-seven returned the form. This is a major limitation, and it affected the breadth of the study. However, the area is unexplored, and the study can therefore provide perspectives on and an understanding of the research field, despite limited data.

The interpretation of the results must be cautious in terms of the transferability to other municipalities and administrations. It may be that relatively big openness characterises the administrations whose heads were positive to distributing the questionnaire, which, in that case, would constitute a selection bias. The material obtained is, however, considered sufficiently rich and balanced to highlight and discuss LSS administrators' knowledge, learning and praxis.

## Conclusion

The study shows that further knowledge is requested within all the fields that are central to the LSS administrators' assignment. Professional knowledge grounded in disability studies and that promotes reflexivity and critical thinking (Hultman *et al.*, 2018) is necessary for the intention of the law to be maintained. Good access to administrators with the correct competence is important for those who need support and help from social services. The competence supply of administrators is therefore an urgent issue from both the citizens' and the service users' perspective (Socialstyrelsen, 2020). Our study demonstrates the problematic situation that arises when people have worked for several years in the profession, and essential and necessary knowledge has not been imparted either within the education or at the workplace. This study also shows the relevance of CoP in social work and in the administration of social welfare. It demonstrates that a CoP existed for some situated learning at our respondents' workplace but that other sources of knowledge were not found within the CoP. Even where a CoP existed, it was not in the shape of planned activities but rather seemed to emerge as a result of someone's initiative or need.

If scientific knowledge is not used, the focus will be on communicative and legal knowledge and on information and knowledge from the stakeholders. Such a practice among social workers deviates from the definition of the profession (Bergmark and Lundström, 2002; Nordlander, 2006). However, encouraging the inclusion of a theoretical and scientific framework in the local knowledge sharing in the CoP, would, at best, ensure that the practice is based on a higher level of understanding and that the theoretical knowledge will be used and developed in practice.

A higher education degree with baseline knowledge within social work is often an entrance ticket to a job in that field (Stone, 2016) despite possibly weak knowledge about disability and the life

circumstances of individuals living with a disability. A possible solution could be the establishment of a theoretically based advanced course for those handling LSS cases or a compulsory specialist master's degree for future LSS administrators, focusing on disability and life consequences. In future research, focus groups or case studies could provide a deeper understanding of LSS administrators' need for and use of knowledge within disability and its consequences in everyday life. Furthermore, future research may shed light on the potential of CoPs, under favourable circumstances, to promote a joint development of theoretical and practical knowledge.

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